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*International forum for addressing global concerns:
a critical analysis of UN decision making*

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Introduction

This paper is being undertaken in preparation for my research inquiry, which will focus on the UN Millennium Development Project. In particular the research inquiry will attempt to establish *how* and *why* universal primary education (Millennium Development Goal 2) came to be selected as a priority from among other priorities.

To prepare for my research inquiry it will be helpful to develop a better understanding of how UN policy decisions are made and that is the purpose of this paper. The focus question is: **How does the UN describe its own decision making processes, what do critics say about UN decision making and what are the implications of this for my research inquiry?**

First I will explore the UN's description of its decision making processes, as outlined in 'Intergovernmental negotiations and decision making at the United Nations: A guide' (UN NGLS 2007). This will benefit the research inquiry by:

- Providing a basis for establishing if MDG2 was selected by espoused UN decision making processes
- Building essential knowledge in preparation for interviewing UN personnel.

Following that I will analyse and present something of what critics say about UN decision making. This will benefit the research inquiry by:

- Helping me interpret data, by having a more developed understanding of some of the issues lying underneath UN decision making.
- Helping identify and understand instances where the stated purpose of a UN policy and the real purpose are at odds.
- Understanding why MDG2 was selected.

Then I will present findings and outline the implications of those findings for my research inquiry.

1. How readings were selected

Finding a guide to UN decision making

Finding clear and concise information as to how the UN makes decisions was not easy. First, a comprehensive search of the UN website revealed no such source or document. To illustrate this point: from the main page there is a link to a page entitled 'structure and organisation' (UN 2011a). The structure and organisation page contains 102 links. These links give information on main committees, subsidiary bodies, advisory subsidiary bodies, programmes and funds, research and training institutes, commissions, expert bodies, other related bodies, specialised agencies, related organisations, secretariats of conventions, UN trust funds and other UN entities (U.N. 2011 a). Each one of these 102 links, then, contains further links. For example the 'committees' link reveals another 38 links describing the role and function of various types of committees under the headings; committees, ad hoc committees, advisory committees, executive committees, high level committees, special committees (UN 2011b).

The same website also contains an organizational chart (UN 2007), which shows what UN organisations exist and how these organisations relate to one another. It includes:

Principal organs	6
Subsidiary bodies	12
Programmes and funds	15
Research and training institutes	5
Commissions	12
Related organisations	4
Specialised agencies	14
World Bank group	5
Secretariat	16
Other bodies	4
Other UN trust funds	2
Other UN entities	4
total	99

This demonstrates the scale and complexity of the UN. Understanding UN decision making structures and processes therefore is difficult. And that is without considering informal interactions, hidden politics or involvement with non-governmental organizations and society at large.

I then focussed on the UN 'Non-Governmental Liaison Service' (UN NGLSa), whose purpose is to "serve as a UN System-civil society interface" (2011). This service published a document entitled 'Intergovernmental negotiations and decision making at the United Nations: A guide' (2007). The guide "Explains the governance and decision-making fora and processes of the United Nations system" (UN NGLS 2007 preface). It also states that "The UN can seem a vast and bewildering place, full of undecipherable language, meetings behind closed doors, strange regulations and unwieldy organizational structures" (UN NGLS 2007, XIII).

I then took steps to check the validity of the guide. First I spoke with a member of the UN NGLS to check how accurate a reflection of UN decision making NGLS felt the guide was. The person stated that "This is the best guide to UN decision making". After that I checked the guide's contents against the UN website and found no contradictions between what was published in it and the website. However the guide has a disclaimer, stating that "the views expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent those of the... United Nations System" (UN NGLS 2007, II). Still, given the "bewildering" complexity of the UN, and the absence of any other publication of this sort, the publication does fit the purpose of this paper.

Selecting readings by UN critics

To select literature I reviewed lecture notes from the Education Policy unit and Educational Research units. I spoke with Dr. John Lowe, Dr. Kelly Teamey, Dr. Alan Reid and Dr. Collette Chabbott. Then I read the abstracts of about 250 books and articles, 36 of which have been used in this paper.

Finding UN critics was easy. Finding authors/researchers who specifically study and critique UN decision making processes was not. However Chapter 3 of Pogge (2010) did critique UN decision making, doing with MDG1 what I intend to do in my research inquiry with MDG2.

2. What the UN says about UN decision making in 'Intergovernmental negotiations and decision making at the United Nations: A guide.'

This section of the paper outlines what the UN NGLS guide says about UN decision making. The guide explains the “governance and decision-making fora and processes of the United Nations” (UN NGLS 2007, preface). For the sake of brevity I paraphrase the text and occasionally quote. I have attempted to open the UN guide up to the reader, rather than bring the reader to my own interpretation of it. There is also some additional commentary from me which anticipates the critique to follow.

Purpose of the UN

The guide states that “The primary role of the United Nations is to serve as an international forum for addressing a wide range of global concerns” (UN NGLS 2007, p. 3). Its work results in collective decisions that “guide the work of the United Nations and shape new international, regional and national policies and actions” (p. 3). According to the guide there are a wide variety of stakeholders, apart from governments, that contribute to UN decision making processes. These include “non-governmental and civil society organizations and other actors” (p. 3). They participate through formal and informal processes as well as direct and indirect advocacy efforts, although the guide states that only governments can vote. The guide also endorses the legitimacy of UN decisions and recommendations by stating that “Its recommendations carry the weight of world opinion” (UN NGLS 2007 p. 5). The extent to which UN decision making, and in particular UN policy making, is the role of government or other bodies and organisations will be discussed in this paper, as well as in my research inquiry.

Consensus decision making

According to the guide the key mode of decision making at the UN is consensus. In consensus decision making “Member States work together to reach consensus decisions in the belief that strong collective support can help transform written agreements into affective action” (UN NGLS 2007, Introduction). However in practice many decisions are made by majority vote, such as all resolutions of the UN General Assembly. Each member state is allowed one vote and decisions are made by simple majority, although “Decisions on particularly critical questions, such as peace and security, require a two-thirds majority” (UN NGLS 2007, p. 5). In contrast consensus decisions are usually those where all participants reach a decision by staying with the decision making process until all are in agreement, or at least in a pragmatic

sense, until a workable agreement is reached. Therefore there is a possible tension between reaching consensus and using simple majority because a simple majority vote could leave almost half of those voting dissatisfied with the decision. This will be explored in the critique.

Increasing role of non-state players and the growing relevance of civil society support

According to Ban Ki-moon, UN Secretary-General, “Today, no UN development effort... can make real headway without support from civil society” (p. XII). According to the guide the engagement of civil society “Has clearly enhanced the legitimacy, accountability and transparency of intergovernmental decision-making” (p. XII).

An assumption on which the UN was originally constituted appears to be that the Nation-State delegates are able to represent the views of the people in their constituencies. However this assumption is difficult to defend under evolving global communication and networking realities; therefore the guide says that modes of UN decision making are changing. So even though only governments make decisions at the UN, according to the guide “the decision making process itself has increasingly opened to an array of non-state players, including non-governmental organizations, the private sector, trade unions, foundations, think tanks, local authorities and academic researchers” (UN NGLS 2007, p.VI). Cited as examples are world conferences and summits where ‘civil society’ and other partners bring their influence to bear on decisions.

Of the non-state players the guide gives the most substantial attention to NGO’s which, “As a whole, have taken a new interest in the UN as an arena for policy dialogue and advocacy” (UN NGLS 2007, p. VIII). According to the guide NGO’s are invited to participate in the special sessions of the General Assembly and are involved in the work of committees. NGO’s conduct many forms of advocacy, including meeting with delegates and offering position papers.

The guide also states that involvement of the greater public is now possible directly, rather than via nation-state delegates or NGO’s, apparently mobilizing hundreds of thousands of people on a range of issues. One of the trends cited is online mobilization where people can work on similar issues through e-learning, advocacy and training. Apparently “Such networks have provided a forum for policy discussions and governance of the Internet, communication rights and empowerment” (p. IX). In regards to the Millennium Development Project Member States agreed in the year 2000 to give “greater

opportunities to the private sector, NGOs and civil society to contribute to realizing UN goals and programmes” (p.XI). Just how this involvement has an impact in practice is not specified, but the guide reiterates that intergovernmental meetings and conferences would be “unthinkable without the policy perspectives, unique advocacy and mobilization of civil society” (p. XII).

The guide has a striking lack of clarity around the terminology used to describe who, beyond governments, are involved in the work of the UN. For example the term ‘civil society’ is used frequently. But how does the UN identify who or what civil society is? And how does the UN know that it is engaging with civil society or a representative sample of it? When giving practical examples of civil society involvement, in almost all instances, the guide refers to NGO involvement. These are NGO’s which have to conform to UN stipulations. The guide uses the terms ‘civil society involvement’ and ‘NGO involvement’ interchangeably and may thereby be assuming that NGO involvement constitutes civil society involvement. The guide also refers to involvement of ‘the greater public’ and, ‘networks’, ‘forums’ and ‘online mobilization’. It does not specify in what ways are these are similar to or different from each other and from civil society and/or NGO’s. These issues will be picked up in the critique below. Yet according to the guide, despite a broader involvement of people and organisations, the UN “remains an institution governed by its Member States and is structured primarily to support opportunities for governments to debate and make decisions” (UN NGLS 2007, X). This is not surprising, as the UN was set up as an intergovernmental organisation.

Role of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)

I have also chosen to include some of what the guide says about ECOSOC, because ECOSOC bears responsibility for implementing and monitoring the progress of “Internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals” (UN NGLS 2007 p. 17) through its Annual Ministerial Review, hence its relevance to my research.

According to the guide ECOSOC was established to coordinate the “Economic and social work of the United Nations and the specialised agencies and bodies, collectively referred to as the UN system” (UN NGLS 2007, p. 8). It formulates policy recommendations, calls for conferences and conducts studies. Its work continues year round, and much of what it does occurs in sub-committees. It “Also serves as a coordination mechanism for autonomously governed specialized agencies, such as ...the United Nations

Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)..., the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF)” (p. 11).

Its relationship with the IMF and the World Bank is very close. The IMF and World Bank address ECOSOC members in a high level one-month ECOSOC session held each July. Each April ECOSOC also holds a high level meeting “with finance ministers heading the key committees of the Bretton Woods Institutions—the World Bank and the IMF” (p. 11).

The 54 government member-states of ECOSOC are elected by the General Assembly and serve three year terms. There are a set number of delegates from specified regions. “While seeking decisions based on consensus, each member has one vote; voting is by simple majority” (UN NGLS 2007 p. 9). So for a body that has such a key role only 54 of the 193 member states are directly represented in ECOSOC. And of them it is not clear how many are involved in the committees, who is involved and how they are selected for involvement. Then there is also the question as to how these sub-committees relate to other organisations, such as the IMF and World Bank? Again the decision making structure and accountabilities are not clear. But it does beg the question as to whether the UN is primarily a gathering of nation states or of other people and organisations, or both.

Role of conferences and special meetings

One of ECOSOC’s responsibilities is to call and run conferences, summits and special meetings on key issues. Conferences are important to MDG2. For example the conference on education for all at Jomtien in 1990 helped keep education ‘on the map’ of policy priorities. This was also the case in regards to UNESCO’s Manifesto on Poverty (1999) which anticipated the formulation of the Millennium Development Goals (ECOSOC, 2011).

According to the guide such conferences and gatherings are called when “Member States collectively agree that an issue needs widespread political and public attention” (UN NGLS 2007 p. 15). More recently “These have also included informal, interactive hearings convened by the General Assembly with non-governmental and civil society organizations and other actors in the lead up to high-level meetings or dialogues on a range of subjects” (UN NGLS 2007 p. 15). Conferences are normally initiated, at least in a formal sense, by passing a resolution. The resolution usually determines the goals, agenda and the preparatory process. Conference organizers, usually UN professionals, exert substantial

influence on conference outcomes. To illustrate this the guide states that, in regards to documents arising out of a conference, they are generally “More than half finished by the time of the event, with only the most contentious issues outstanding” (UN NGLS 2007, p. 28). Also conferences are opportunities for people and organisations, other than member states, to exert influence.

Role of funds and agencies

The guide also refers to a range of funds and agencies that “Contribute to and are shaped by the United Nations’ political processes” (UN NGLS 2007 p. 25). These funds and agencies participate frequently in intergovernmental decision processes. They do this by speaking to delegates, providing reports and other forms of background information. When decisions are being negotiated, funds and agencies are called upon to “Carry out specific activities or assist in reaching certain internationally agreed goals” (UN NGLS 2007 p. 25). The guide, by stating the above, indicates some of the complexities of UN decision making. In regards to funds and agencies the role of the IMF and World Bank, critical to MDG2 (see UN Millennium Project 2005), will be explored in my research inquiry.

How an agreement is made

The guide also outlines what would constitute a normal UN decision making process. Which is:

- “Election of officers for the meeting; agreement on organizational issues.
- Preparation and consideration of initial draft outcome text.
- Integration of agreed changes and proposals by the Secretariat, the chair or a facilitator...
- Additional rounds of negotiations and changes.
- The final text, adopted by consensus.
- Notification of any reservations by individual governments.
- For legally binding instruments: ratification” (UN NGLS 2007 p. 22).

The process outlined is presented as a linear sequence, although the guide qualifies this by highlighting the non-linear nature of UN decision making.

3. What critics say about UN decision making

This section of the paper highlights what some critics have said about UN decision making and compares this with the UN guide. It anticipates this paper’s findings and the implications for my research.

A ruling apparatus imposing western rationality

Whilst the NGLS guide presents the UN as a forum for addressing global concerns, some critics say that the UN promotes a certain developmentalism which purposefully constructs “A hegemonic representation of the developing world to be lifted out of poverty through western episteme” (Chan 2007, p. 360). This then gives a mandate for the UN to use its agencies as “A machinery of power for producing knowledge about and exercising control over so-called ‘developing’ countries” (Ilcan & Phillips 2010, p. 846). Effectively the UN is at least a part of, if not constitutes, a ruling apparatus.

To explore this critique let us first look at the idea of a western episteme and rationality. For the purposes of this paper, when I quote critics or use the term ‘western’ I am referring to a loose knit conglomeration of nation-states, organisations and individuals that are associated with western rationality, with its roots in the enlightenment. Through colonialism western rationality took on both a political and economic power. Also, more recently, western rationality is linked with, although not contingent upon, neo-liberal economics. That is a particular approach encouraging free market economies, capitalism, the reduction of state ownership of resources and services toward privatisation. Inevitably such broad generalisations will miss complexities, subtleties and varying degrees of responsibility and influence. However, despite the complexities, I believe terms such as western episteme and rationality are useful because there are a recognisable set of characteristics, as described above, that do typify this as distinct approach or set of approaches.

Also critics refer to a ruling apparatus or ruling hegemony. There are two senses in which I use the term in this paper. The first is in a formal sense, with organisations such as the UN, IMF and World Bank, also nation-states, the second where individuals, organisations and nation states influence each other in less formal ways. This might be through the intervention of agencies or could even be through individuals assuming to know other’s expectations of them and acting accordingly (isomorphism).

According to critics then, the UN and related organisations, constitute a ruling apparatus that exerts control through the standardization of the conduct of populations. For Ilcan and Phillips “This standardization has been achieved through the calculation of many areas of social and economic life, including (but not limited to) education, food production and consumption, peace and security and trade” (2010, p. 850). So whilst the UN is not a global government it exercises substantial control

through “techno-scientific means” (p. 850). That is, it establishes goals, for which countries receive funding, such as the millennium development goals. The achievement of goals is monitored through data gathering, regulation and control and reported on through devices such as the Global Monitoring Report. Developing countries find themselves using a particular way of governing that aligns with a neo-liberal agenda. Other organisations that work closely with the UN also use these techniques and realise control through conditionalities attached to funding and the burdens of associated debt (Moutsios 2009). For Chabbott this ruling hegemony has institutionalised rules that transcend nation-states, local culture, politics and economics. These rules also “define legitimate actors, script those actors’ activities. And designate their spheres of influence”, giving complying nation-states credibility (Chabbott 2003, p. 163). Such credibility then increases the likelihood of loans and grants by other institutions and countries (Moutsios 2009).

The UN justifies its gradual roll-out of the western episteme, by stating that they are supported by world opinion (see UN NGLS 2007 p. 5). For UN critics there is “a certain scepticism about the normative idea of world opinion as a moral consensus that bestows... [the UN’s] legitimacy” (Jaeger 2008, p. 609). To start with it is impossible to know what world opinion is because you cannot accurately ascertain the views of every person in the world. Nor can delegates at the UN know if they are accurately representing the views of those in their constituency. And even then, if a majority vote is carried, the UN cannot reasonably claim to have the backing of world opinion because the views of those who voted against are as much a part of the world as those who voted for. We could then get down into the issues of data bias, politics and so on which further disprove the normative idea of world opinion, but for the sake of brevity I have said enough, I think, to show that UN cannot reasonably claim to have the backing of world opinion.

In regards to the imposition of the western episteme, some critics say that there are flawed assumptions lying under the whole development enterprise. The assumption, for example, that western solutions will fix world problems is flawed, because these solutions are in part a cause of current injustices (Escobar 2004). The western solutions to world problems tend to be derived from human capital theory and neo-liberal ideologies, embrace free market economies, foreign ownership, the imposition of a recognisable governance structure (called democracy by its adherents) and privatization (Moutsios 2009). In such an ideology competition is embraced at all levels. So whilst on the surface it seems fair, in practice developed countries maintain economic protections that developing countries are unable to

afford, such as US and European primary industry subsidies and import tariffs. Therefore the western episteme does not provide a level playing field with equal opportunity and access for all.

The claim of being supported by 'world opinion' is also linked to the influence of western rationality as the dominant ruling hegemony at least for the later part of the 20th Century. However the gradual rise of China, India, various Islamic states (maybe also the Islamist movement) in global economic terms brings into question if the western episteme has indeed been exported to *all* poorer nation-states, and even if it has, just by sheer economic power, are we experiencing a gradually increasing influence of other epistemes?

Pogge (2010) and Ilcan (2006) say that UN funds and agencies reflect a general bias toward affluent countries and that this bias is having a negative impact on the world's poor. For example Pogge puts forward that the rules of international relations favour affluent countries "By allowing them to continue protecting their markets through tariffs, anti-dumping duties, quotas, export credits, and huge subsidies to domestic producers in ways that poor countries are not permitted, or cannot afford, to match" (2010, p. 35). Some are better equipped to compete than others. This is a serious matter because the open market reinforces the inequality that existed in the first place. For Pogge, the end result is that poorer countries are "Falling further and further behind, the global poor become ever more marginalized" (Pogge 2010, p. 35). If, as Ilcan (2006) says, the ruling institutional order helps create winners and waste products, then in so far as the UN bears responsibility for that global governing order, it also bears responsibility for the poverty that occurs as a result of it. Therefore, on the one hand, the UN is attempting to alleviate poverty and injustice, whilst on the other it is institutionalising and embedding a global order which perpetuates injustice.

The difficulties of consensus decision making

According to the NGLS guide consensus is the foundation of UN decision making. As has been shown above, this is carried out through a complex web of bodies, organs, committees, nation-state representatives, related organisations and so on. However critics point out a range of difficulties with consensus decision making. To start with, on the surface consensus decision making may seem fair and inclusive, but a motive for using it, as Codd argues, is that "If people believe that political decisions are the result of public discussion, and if they have the right to contribute to that discussion, then they are

most likely to accept rather than resist existing power relationships” (Codd 1998, p. 237). This gives those controlling decision making processes the opportunity to set the agenda.

Also according to some critics consensus decision making leads to the marginalisation of small nation-states (Jones 2007a). Research by McNamara (2009) showed that the scale of the UN and the number of decisions and initiatives underway at any one time presents difficulties for many smaller nation-states. A small nation-state does not have the personnel or resources to keep track of all decisions, let alone contribute to them. Her research quotes a Pacific rim country’s UN ambassador as saying “You always feel marginalised, because you cannot cover all of what is happening and, of course, you know, what we call the ‘Big 5’ – they always seem to have control over things and, of course, makes you feel that you are being sort of left behind” (2009, p. 4). I do not wish to make a broad generalisation here about small nation-state involvement, but nonetheless McNamara’s research is enough to show that not all nation states have equal influence in the UN’s decision making processes. One could also argue that not all nation-states should have equal influence at the UN as delegates are representing in some cases small populations, in other cases large populations.

The degree to which UN decisions are being made by consensus is also questionable given that many decisions are made by simple majority vote. Therefore, in the General Assembly for example, one could easily have a situation where just over half the nation states agree with a motion, and it is carried. Also not all nation-states vote in every UN forum. For example in the Security Council there are 5 permanent members (each with power of veto) and 10 non-permanent member states. So in the Security Council and ECOSOC only a minority of nation-states have a vote.

Consensus decisions can also lead to confusion as to who is making decisions, especially if the decision making processes have a fluidity to them involving UN organs, committees, related organisations and NGO’s. Those controlling the process may arrange procedures in such a way as to affect the outcome, or those participating may also exert control on the process. This, of course, could be true of various types of decision making processes, not just consensus. Other researchers have also looked at UN decision making with similar questions. For example Emmerij et al quote UN staff member Sadako Ogato as saying “I think it is difficult to see who is really setting the agenda now” (2005, p. 226). It will be interesting to see if what I have theorised about above was the case in the selection of the millennium development goals.

Role of nation-states

Nation-states are presented by the UN as central to its decision making. The UN, after all, remains an organisation made up of nation-states, and only nation states have the right to vote (UN NGLS 2007). The UN acknowledges the important role of the secretariat, related organisations, NGO's and civil society but it does not present them as equal partners with nation-states. However the reality is far more complex than the UN NGLS guide might indicate.

First, we should not assume that all 192 member states have legitimately elected governments. Some may have come to power through corruption and violence. Pogge believes we must then ask ourselves "Whether it is morally acceptable that the existing international order recognizes rulers- merely because they exercise effective power within a country and regardless of how they acquired or exercise such power" (2010, p. 18). So if not all nation-states have a legitimate government then they should not have the authority to vote at the UN? Yet defining exactly who or what constitutes a legitimate government is as prone to bias and Pogge does seem to assume that a democratically elected government is a legitimate government, without specifying what constitutes a valid democracy and a valid democratic election process.

Critics also state that global order-building is not necessarily done by nation-states, even if to some degree, that is within the charter of the UN. They argue, rather, that international economic activity and the ascendance of global markets has meant that "Numerous international organizations and agreements now assume primacy over the nation-state in their capacity and aims to govern order" (Ilcan 2006, p. 857). Other critics disagree, stating that the role of nation-states has been enhanced recently. Jones says that nation-states have "Clawed themselves back to the centre of the multilateral stage" (2007, p. 322) although does not provide evidence to support this claim.

Increasing influence of non-state actors and civil society support

The UN, and UN critics cited here, state almost overwhelmingly that non-state actors, NGO's and civil society are exerting a greater influence on the UN than previously. All of the critics cited below saw this involvement as positive. Thakur and Weiss (2009) use the idea of the existence of 'three UN's' to describe this phenomenon of growing non-state actor involvement. The first comprised of member states, the second of the secretariats and the third of actors that are associated with the world

organisation but not formally part of it. "This 'insider-outsider' UN includes NGO's, academics, consultants, experts, independent commissions, and other groups" (p. 21). They believe that these informal networks often affect shifts in priorities, policies and practices. For Jones NGO's are "highly effective producers of alternative assessments of the world condition" (2007a, p. 329). Whilst Emmerij's research findings (2005) show that almost all UN personnel he interviewed saw NGO's as an essential component of ideational change. They push their own ideas or badger governments to consider ideas already on the table. For Chabbott NGO activity has been enhanced by inexpensive information and communication technologies which make it easier "for local NGO's and *social movements* to tap into international support and information networks "(Chabbott 2003, p. 11), although for Chabbott this has not necessarily produced results consistent with international declarations and frameworks. In part this is due to lack of support (financial and other) necessary to implement programs at a grass roots level.

Pogge (2010), also sees benefit in the increasing role of non-state actors. He believes that a world of international relations dominated only by nation-states is "Rapidly losing its explanatory adequacy" (p.17). What is emerging are trans-national rules that are the result of the increasing role of agencies, organisations, corporations and NGO's. For Pogge it has never been plausible that the interests of the states should be the only considerations that are morally relevant in international relations. Whilst I agree with Pogge, the question arises as to who should be influencing global relations. Relying on NGO's, for example, can be problematic. Critics warn against making false assumptions about who and what NGO's represent. Chabbott states that sometimes NGO's "Serve as stand-ins for the poor in the development planning and implementation; their presence in international fora and activities enable international organizations to claim that the concerns of the poor are represented" (2003, p. 11). Also some critics believe that agencies are co-opting NGO's for their own purposes (Jones 2007a). So there are real concerns around the gap between who or what an NGO claims to represent and who or what they actually represent. Whilst NGO activity and influence is increasing, decision making processes are just as open to manipulation, deception and self-interest as any other political process.

Linked to the above, the UN guide claims that UN decisions have civil society support and that such support gives legitimacy to UN decisions. But there are problems with making such a claim. To start with, in claiming that you have civil society support, you make a distinction between civil and uncivil society. What criteria are being used to judge who is civil and who is not civil? Who is in a position to decide or define who is civil and who is not? Using such a distinction also gives those in powerful

positions the opportunity to label dissenters 'uncivilized' and therefore disregard their views. For Jones the concept of civil-society support, as claimed by the UN, is somewhat abstract and transcends the autonomy of nation-states (Jones 2007a, p. 329). So if the UN is a gathering of nation-states why is it claiming civil-society support? Is that something distinct from nation-state support? Exploring this adequately is obviously beyond the scope of this paper but will come into my research inquiry as civil society support is being claimed for the MDG's.

Role of secretariat, funds and agencies and development professionals

There is also criticism of the UN secretariat, related funds and agencies and the development professionals who work in them. Once such institutions become established, they take on a life of their own (Chabbott 2003). This is the case with the UN and related agencies who, according to Chabbott, "By the last decade of the twentieth century... (were) setting agendas, establishing priorities, and mandating action somewhat independently of both nation-states that funded them and their stated beneficiaries" (2003, p. 2). She uses the example of the World Conference on Education for All (Jomtien 1990) which was not an initiative of nation-states but of the leaders of UN organizations and other international development organizations. King (2007) makes similar observations of the Jomtien conference, challenging the assumption that the presence of 155 national delegations meant that the resolution was "Widely shared across the world- which it almost certainly was not" (2007, p. 381). So whilst in theory the UN is primarily a collective of nation-states, in practice its institutions, and the development professionals who work in them, wield substantial power.

Escobar believes that development professionals tend not to question the underlying western/positivist assumptions of their work. Rather they "recognise the inconsistencies and absurdities of their work, but remain convinced of its underlying worth, committed to their colleagues, and/or unwilling or unable to find another line of work" (Escobar 1995, p. 232). In this way they perpetuate the development culture and it is in their interests to do so as it serves their own needs (as well as others). The degree to which Escobar can know the motivations of development professionals is questionable, however, as is the generalisation which he made about those motivations.

However, not all critics subscribe to negative critique of the work of the UN or of agencies which cooperate with it. For example Psacharopoulos, is both a World Bank critic and former staff member of the World Bank. He states that "The Bank is certainly not a villain, intentionally selling bad projects for the sake of lending, as often characterized by its critics. But there has been considerable inertia, both by

staff and management, to change course and fit the countries' developmental needs" (2006, p. p334). He also points out that there is not necessarily one Bank policy as critics might assume, rather a multitude of policies in action at any one time, as well as substantial differences between written policies and policies in practice. Chabbott (1998) agrees with Psacharopoulos on this point. For her the view that the UN or related organization are of a single mind with self-interested goals, simply does not 'stack up' because there is little or no advantage for richer countries in some of the initiatives that the UN sponsors. She states that "Organizational sociologists now recognize that few, if any, organizations are driven by purely rational, efficiency-oriented goals" (p. 208). This is not to discount the possibility that the UN and related organizations attempt to influence the global balance of power, however there is not always a rational explanation for actions taken by the UN, its related agencies or development professionals; and maybe some of the world's poorest are benefitting from the UN's work.

Role of conferences and special meetings

The guide on UN decision making (UN NGLS 2007) emphasises the important role of conferences and special meetings in UN decision making. Likewise critics pay substantial attention to these events. Conferences are important because decisions are made, priorities are set and shared ways of thinking are established.

Conferences are born, at least in part, out of a desire to do something. Western rationality and a positivist approach pressures employees to show that they are delivering something that can be measured or quantified. According to Chabbott "Western notions of individual organization, purposive action, and the universal applicability of Western science, plus chronic crisis by lack of funds, propel conscientious professionals into action... and thus a conference is born" (2003, p.165). In the education field "Enormous pressure is placed upon development practitioners to rationalize the promotion of educational development" (Chabbott 2003, p. 165). An accepted form of development management is data gathering, planning, executing the plan, then reviewing progress. This approach is evidenced, for example, in the annual Global Monitoring Report. In my view it is understandable that development sponsors want to see a tangible output for money given or loaned and also for other forms of expenditure such as salaries. Yet there are a whole range of assumptions lying underneath this approach which can be critiqued. For example the assumption that one can accurately measure progress, or that progress occurs as a result of simple cause-effect chains, rather than complex webs of influence. An in-depth critique is beyond the scope of this paper but, at this point, I wish to simply highlight the subjective nature of development.

This also links to the role of development professionals and the self-perpetuating nature of their work, as discussed above. Development professionals, as well as organisations, donors and beneficiaries, “Have rationalised new types of activities, such as world conferences and global development campaigns, that, in turn, produce more discourse, that, in turn, legitimates more actors and activities” (Chabbott 2003, p.163). Conferences perpetuate the ‘development phenomenon’. For example the Education for All movement, despite never reaching the targets set, continues to be the subject of conferences, draw funding and personnel.

Critics also put forward that conferences arise out of a tendency toward institutional and mimetic isomorphism. That is the tendency to do things the way other people are doing them either to look good in others eyes, or simply because the ‘common sense’ dictates that this is the way things are done. So there is not necessarily a rational reason for conferences, or the way they are conducted, but a tendency to do things the way others are doing them.

Conferences also serve a public-relations function, legitimising UN work (Chabbot 2010). Involving NGO’s and other organisations, having nation-state representatives, making decisions based on research findings, claiming that grass-roots voices are represented, all add authority to conference outcomes and justify expenditure to deliver those outcomes. Conferences also provide markers for development. For example in discussing Education For All one can look at the outcomes of Jomtien (1990), then trace through Dakar (2000) and so on. The themes, talks and outcomes of the conferences provide a framework for analysing the trajectory of the Education for All initiative, although the Education for All initiative, with its six goals, and MDG2 are not identical. I will explore the role of conferences in relation to MDG2 as a part of my research to see if what I discussed above applies.

A sobering thought on conferences is given by James Jonah, former United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs:

“The general view was that they (conferences) are good in terms of raising consciousness. That is one major goal which I would accept. But frankly, realistically, and honestly, it was also as a bureaucratic device by the secretariat to create institutions. If you look, many of these things came out of conferences. Someone in the secretariat would be planning, ‘how many posts am I

going to get?... Most of it is conceived of by people who want to advance their careers" (*as cited in Emmerij et al 2005, p. 227*).

Process and intentions behind policy decisions

The NGLS guide largely presents UN decision making as linear and simple, relying on nation-states, which it is not. Yet it also discusses the role of NGO's and civil society and the complexity of UN decision making. Critics point out that UN policy making is no longer the exclusive affair of nation-states, and that transnational institutions have substantial influence. According to Moutsios (2009) such institutions decisions are "Largely asymmetric, nondemocratic and opaque" (p. 478).

There are also disjunctures between the various intentions of a policy, the texts of a policy and the effects of a policy. UN policies are a result of consultation, negotiation and compromise. Almost certainly the intentions of the agreement and the policy texts will not be identical. Nor will the reader's interpretation of the texts, or the development professional's implementation, necessarily match the authors' intentions (Ball 2004). So, to put forward that there is a cohesive intention behind a policy makes little sense. Codd calls this the intentional fallacy which "holds that the meaning of a literary text corresponds to what the author intended" (1998, p. 238). As he points out the first mistake is to think of intentions as private mental events. The second is that people can be mistaken about their own intentions. The third is that we must distinguish between intention as a prior plan and an action that is done intentionally. Psacharopoulos gives an example of the difficulty of understanding the process and intentions of policy from his experience in the World Bank, stating that "Attempting to reach consensus in a large organization, and sheer personal fear of endorsing a 'bad' policy, makes the task of tracing Bank education policy extremely difficult" (2006, p. 334).

To sum up then, some UN critics declare that UN decision making maintains power relationships, representing the interests of richer countries more than poorer countries and gradually promoting a western episteme. Critics also note the increasing role of non-state players, the substantial influence of the UN secretariat and development professionals in general. Conferences are important in UN decision making (including the MDG's) and reflect and perpetuate the development culture. Yet it is incorrect to assume that all of this is a part of a unified and single-minded agenda. In exploring the selection of MDG2 I will not be surprised to find the complexities typical of policy processes.

4. Findings and implications for my research

As a result of undertaking this reading paper I have reached the following findings and propose implications for my research inquiry:

a) UN decision making is complex. Whilst the UN states that it is primarily a forum of nation-state representatives, in practice it is far more than this. The secretariat, related funds and agencies and civil society wield substantial power. Some critics describe them as a machinery for standardising the conduct of populations, based on western positivist assumptions.

The implications for my research are substantial. If I am trying to establish *how* and *why* MDG2 came to be selected over other priorities I will need to establish what role the various UN organs played, as well as what role related funds and agencies and civil society played.

Research questions might include:

- What role did the General Assembly play in the selection of MDG2
- What role did other UN organs play?
- Who were the key supporters of MDG2?
- Why did the key supporters of MDG2 support it?
- Who exerted influence during the selection process, and how and why did they exert that influence?
- Did anybody, or group, oppose its selection? If so why?

b) I have also found that the UN's stated purpose and the purpose in practice are not always the same. This is hardly surprising, as this could describe many organisations. Whilst the UN states that its purpose is to serve as an international forum for addressing a wide range of global concerns, in practice it sometimes promotes a type of developmentalism based on neo-liberal philosophies. This perpetuates a culture which favours some, leaving others further behind. Therefore the UN could be trying to alleviate suffering and poverty, whilst at the same time be causing suffering and poverty.

The MDG's are reflective of this and are not a neutral diagnostic. Rather they "rely on three forms of neoliberal rationalities of government: information profiling, responsabilization and knowledge

networks” (Ilcan & Phillips 2010, p. 845). For Jones “The shadow of global power imbalances- not least the widening North-South divide- continues to hang over the entire enterprise” (2007, p. 321). For Pogge marginalization of the poor does not happen because people harbor ill will toward them, rather there is “One main reason for the persistence of massive poverty: the poor have no friends among the global elite” (2010, p. 62).

The main implication of this for my research is that I should explore what priorities got included in the UN Millennium Project, what priorities got left out and why. To keep this contained I could analyse the selection of 8 MDG’s from an original list of 56 in the UN Millennium Declaration (2000). Also I will explore if the 8 MDG’s selected were more in line with the neo-liberal philosophy than those that were excluded, although I will need to be manage my own bias and assumptions carefully here.

Research questions might include:

- Is there a disconnect between the decisions of the General Assembly, as expressed in the UN Millennium Declaration (2000), and the current form of the 8 MDG’s?
- Was there a shift in priorities between the EFA conference (Jomtien 1990) and MDG2?
- To what extent has MDG2 created employment opportunities for development professionals and related organisations and departments?

c) I have also found that conferences are important in establishing priorities and developing common languages. They perpetuate the development culture and employment opportunities for development professionals.

The implications for my research are that conferences relating to MDG2 need to be analysed carefully and will be a valuable source of building data. Looking at who proposed a conference, who organised and set the agenda and who had influence throughout may help reveal the dynamics of power relations at the time. Related questions might include:

- How many conferences have been held regarding EFA/MDG2
- Who took the decision to run the conferences?
- Who organised them?
- Who set the agenda?
- What priorities were reflected in the agenda?

- Who attended?
- Who spoke?
- How were decisions made?
- What were the outcomes?

d) Another finding of this paper is that the UN claims to have the backing of world opinion, yet cannot prove that this is the case. Also the claim to having ‘civil society support’ is questionable for reasons discussed above. These two claims are used to legitimise UN decisions.

The implications for my research are that I should not take what UN personnel say or write at face value, but question and ‘drill down’, working across data. For example if it is claimed that MDG’s carry the weight of world opinion and civil society support, explore this, ask for the supportive evidence. Related questions might include:

- What is world opinion and how does the UN know what that opinion is?
- What is civil society support and how does the UN know that it has it?

e) A further finding, which does not sit comfortably with some of the above, is that it is wrong to assume that the UN only serves the interests of powerful nation states. This is a cynical stance that could lead to incorrect findings. As Chabbott states, “The evidence does not generally support such a conclusion, either at the national or individual level” (Chabbott 2003, p.164). Or as Emmerij et al state, the MDG’s have “Aroused much scepticism. Yet careful analysis shows that over the last forty years the UN has set some fifty development goals, with a record of performance that is more encouraging than often realized” (2005, p. 216). Therefore whilst much development activity may benefit development professionals, organisations and developed countries, they also benefit others.

The implications for my research are that I should remain open to being convinced that MDG2 is genuinely and effectively addressing the needs of the world’s poorest. Rather than assuming that UN actors are making decisions primarily out of self-interest. Also, the fact that this last finding does not sit comfortably with those above it is, in my view, positive. It means that I have work to do in exploring UN power dynamics and priorities and clarifying my thinking.

In sum then, I set out in this paper to explore UN decision making, in particular how the UN says it makes decisions, what critics say about UN decision making, and the implications of this for my research. I found that UN decision making is, as the UN guide states, complex and bewildering, illustrating perfectly what Vidovich says about policy, that it is “A messy process” (2007, p. 288). With this in mind, I now move into research which will attempt to establish how MDG2 was selected as a priority from among other priorities, and attempt to make sense of why it was selected.

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Summary

This paper was undertaken so that the author would develop a better understanding of how UN policy decisions are made. It forms an integral part of preparations for a research inquiry, which will focus on the UN Millennium Development Project, in particular *how* and *why* universal primary education came to be selected as a priority from among other priorities in the UN Millennium Project.

Maybe not surprisingly, the paper reveals an almost bewildering complexity in the UN. Whilst in some senses UN decision making appears to be linear, in practice, as both the UN and its critics show, it is anything but. This complexity potentially magnifies the possibility for people or groups to influence and manipulate policy processes. The paper also explores the implications of this for the author's empirical research regarding the UN Millennium Project.