

Reflections on Enabling the Millennium Development Goals in Puerto Rico: Representations and Realities

Sarai Lastra

Las metas de desarrollo del milenio (MDGs por sus siglas en inglés) fueron adoptadas en 2000 en la asamblea del milenio por 189 gobiernos de los Naciones Unidas (la O.N.U). Las metas internacionales se centran en la reducción de pobreza y la realización del proyecto de salud universal. Un componente crítico del proyecto del milenio es evaluar el progreso de los indicadores en los varios países. La reseña afirma que las clasificaciones tradicionales de nación-estado ponen apremios en la consecución de las metas en países como Puerto Rico que carecen de representación formal en la O.N.U.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were adopted in 2000 at the Millennium Assembly by 189 governments from the United Nations (UN)¹. The international goals focus on reducing poverty, achieving health and bringing social justice to an ignored segment of the worldwide community². A critical component of the Millennium Project is evaluating the progress of the goals in the various countries. This article contends that traditional nation-state classifications place constraints on enabling the goals in countries like Puerto Rico that lack formal representation at the UN.

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- 1 Sachs, J.D. (2003). Achieving the Millennium Development Goals: Health in the Developing World. Retrieved on 3-01-07 at www.earth.columbia.edu/about/director/pubs/CMHSpeech102903.pdf
 - 2 For a detailed description on the MDGs, see Millenium Development Goals (MDGs). Retrieved on 2-27-07 at www.un.org/millenniumgoals/

To many... I have said that the Caribbean and Central America feel forgotten. It became obvious at that meeting in Margarita [1997 Iberoamerican Summit] when we were left on our own and the representative of Puerto Rico spoke and said what was happening. (Someone says that it was Costa Rica.) Indeed, it was Costa Rica. If only we could say Puerto Rico too, because it is as much a Latin American country as any of us and just as Caribbean as any of us. But we already know the reasons why it cannot attend this meeting.

Fidel Castro, 1999

In 1999, the National Committee on Vital and Health Statistics, an advisory board that focuses on U.S. populations made an assessment of the health data needs of Puerto Rico. The Subcommittee on Population Issues concluded in their report that the U.S. Federal government neglected to include health statistics for the U.S territories in their national health surveys. The report further noted: “any examination of life on the Pacific insular areas, the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico must take into account the unique characteristics of the islands.

While all these areas vary substantially from the mainland U.S, [sic] there is also considerable variation among the island themselves ... one source of variation is the differing political relationships these areas have with the U.S.”¹ About a year later, 189 member states met at the Millennium Assembly and approved the MDGs to “bring about a revolution on behalf of global justice, equity, and an end of extreme poverty” (Sachs, 2003). Keeping the two events in mind, it is easily seen that achieving the MDGs in Puerto Rico, a self-governing U.S. territory, will require nothing less than a revolution in long-established data collection, statistical analysis, publication policies, and reporting techniques.

Representations: Lost in Translation

According to the latest U.S. Census estimates, Puerto Rico has a population of 3.9 million in the island, and 3.7 million in the mainland. The GNI per capita, according to the World Bank, is US\$13,648. Regarding telecommunications

infrastructure, there is an Internet usage penetration of 25.2 (1,000,000 users).²

To provide for the health data needs of Puerto Rico in regional economic, social and health related statistical analyses produced by the UN, the Secretary of Health of Puerto Rico signed an agreement with the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) to create a country profile that strengthened social inclusion, health promotion and the information systems of the island. It should be noted that Puerto Rico is an associate member state of PAHO.³

In 2005, the World Bank released a seminal report on the economic growth analysis for 15 member nations in the Caribbean and concluded that the region was at a “development crossroads.” Although the unit of analysis is supposedly the Caribbean, the World Bank further notes: “Cuba and the dependent territories are not included in the report, unless explicitly stated, but many of the issues discussed here would be applicable to these economies as well.” (p.42). The report is subtitled “Caribbean Development in the 21st Century,” yet includes a single mention of Puerto Rico as an outside competitor to the Dominican Republic for investments in ICT-enabled services and electric and electronics alternatives (p.218). An examination of the World Bank’s website shows that both Cuba and Puerto Rico are excluded from the list of countries in the pull down menu for identifying Latin America and the Caribbean.⁴

1 December 1999, Report on Health Data Needs of the Pacific Insular Areas, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands: A report from the National Committee on Vital and Health Statistics. “Executive Summary”, Retrieved on 3-04-07 at www.ncvhs.hhs.gov/9912islandreport.pdf

2 “Puerto Rico: Internet Usage, broadband and telecommunications reports.” Retrieved on 3-01-07 at www.internetworldstats.com/car/pr.htm

3 See “PAHO, USAID Sign New Agreement to Improve Maternal Health, Cut Infectious Disease, and Strengthen Health Systems.” Retrieved on 3-03-07 at www.paho.org/English/DD/PIN/pr041115.htm

4 See Latin America and Caribbean countries. The World Bank.

These two examples show that the role of the governments and the different stakeholders is pivotal, as Sachs (2003) has noted, for developing a strategy, an implementation plan, a financial arrangement, and an advocacy strategy to achieve the MDGs worldwide. In the case of Puerto Rico, this role is multifaceted since local research agendas are dependent on data collection plans from federal agencies, which in turn are reported to UN agencies. Moreover, in light of Puerto Rico's diaspora, where half of the Puerto Rican people live outside the island, an open question remains: How are the MDGs tracked for diasporas in their hostlands? If the indicators are analyzed and reported using UN geographic defined regions then realities of immigrant or migrant communities in the various member states would not be uncovered in the Statistical Annex reports.⁵

Realities

A solution to the dilemma of regional representations would be for the island to change its political status. Although a logical consequence for the UN, it is a most unlikely alternative. The independence for Puerto Rico has historically been favored by only 5% of the electoral vote. In the last election (2004), the party that favors maintaining the current status as a U.S territory won by a slight margin of 48.40% versus a 48.20% received by the political party that wishes to change from a Commonwealth to a State of the Union. Within the context of this ongoing political debate, Duany (2002), a Cuban anthropologist, has studied the Puerto Rican cultural identity and calls it: "The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move" because of its constant travels to and from the US mainland. Duany observes that Puerto Rico is, unquestionably, a Latin American and Caribbean country, with a Spanish culture, a dominant Spanish language, an Olympic team, and a national baseball and basketball teams. Even Fidel Castro recognizes that our relationship with the United States has not taken away luster from the strength of our Spanish cultural heritage, as noted in the opening quote cited in this article. The open research question is then: How can Puerto Rico take advantage of its Latin culture to advance the MDGs in Spanish speaking countries if its health data is not consistently analyzed and reported?

Underrepresenting Puerto Rico's realities in economic and health reports gives an incomplete view of the progress of the international objectives in the Caribbean. A realistic solution could be to avoid aggregating the country data of Latin America and the Caribbean based on United Nations geographical divisions. For instance, Leipziger et al. (2003) found that "female illiteracy and ethnolinguistic

fractionalization all affect infant and child mortality" (p.13). Since language has been found to be a critical key factor in helping achieve the MDGs, another research alternative would be for the United Nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Health Organization to perform comparative analysis on Cuba with results from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. The Greater Antilles mostly speak Spanish and it would be attractive to assess the cultural challenges, advantages (if any) and constraints of implementing the goals within the Spanish speaking Caribbean contexts.

Another research effort could be to compare the diffusion of the MDGs between the Spanish speaking versus English speaking countries in the area. For example, Latin America (excluding Brazil) and the Greater Antilles (i.e., Puerto Rico, Cuba and Santo Domingo, excluding Haiti) speak Spanish; the Lesser Antilles, on the other hand, speak mainly English, but also French and Dutch. The United Nations could avoid lumping statistics for the region into "Latin America and Caribbean" when reporting the MDGs indicators. This category constrains the social and cultural cohesion of the islands and obscures the richness of the cultural context of the region.

Conclusion

The promotion of the MDGs in Puerto Rico requires overcoming national ideologies as well as research methodological constraints. An advocacy strategy to help overcome research constraints could be to have a Caribbean event similar to the 2006 African Luanda Declaration for Statistics. This would be a meeting convened at an international summit that enabled the Caribbean governments to propose a "Caribbean Declaration for Statistics." Except, history shows this is wishful thinking since Puerto Rico would not be allowed to attend such a meeting for the same reasons it will not attend the Iberoamerican Summit of Spanish and Portuguese speaking countries in Chile in 2007.

Thus, enabling the MDGs in Puerto Rico requires above all a change in major regional, national and global philosophies about the inherent value of collecting data and reporting results on the unit of observation (a Caribbean country) regardless of the governments' political ideologies or its membership status at the UN.

Retrieved on 3-05-07 at web.worldbank.org.

5 United Nations. (2006). The Millennium Development Goals Report. Statistical Annex. Retrieved on 2-28-07 at mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Resources/Static/Products/Progress2006/MDGReport2006.pdf.

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Sarai Lastra is Vice Chancellor of Information Resources and Director of the Virtual Library at Turabo University in Gurabo, Puerto Rico. She is chair of the Community Informatics Center and a member of the advisory group for the Museum and Center of Humanistic Studies at Turabo University, and a consultant to various museum and public library projects in Puerto Rico and the United States. She teaches information retrieval and school library services at Turabo University. She holds a Ph.D. from the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, a master's in library science from Dominican University, a master's in quantitative psychology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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