

ABSTRACT

PLENARY 1

INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENT

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Universities and ‘the end of poverty’: What can we learn from the MDG experience and what do we do in the future?

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are the world’s biggest promise – committing 189 countries to a partnership to make an unprecedented attack on extreme poverty. They are the product of a particular historic moment – the start of a new millennium when, to maintain their legitimacy, world leaders had to come up with a vision of how the human condition would be transformed. Three main forces shaped the processes creating the MDGs – material capabilities (capacities to convert materials into productive or destructive forms): ideas (the concepts and constructs people use to understand and change the world): and, institutions (the organizations and networks through which humans pursue their goals).

Universities played a role in all three of these domains. Their work on science and technology impacts greatly on efforts to raise material capabilities; they were a forum in which ideas about poverty reduction were (and are) contested; and, they train the leaders and staff who people the international, national and local institutions promoting poverty reduction. Most universities and academics involved in these processes appear to have had only a limited understanding of the ways in which knowledge creation fits into the political economy of poverty reduction. This presentation explores the role of universities in the formulation and implementation of the MDGs. It draws lessons about what universities should do ‘after the MDGs’ in 2015. The presentation argues for academics and universities to have a greater focus on thinking through how to turn ideas into concrete actions. This means balancing out the drive to identify ‘what must be done’ with the analysis and action on ‘how can this be done’. Eradicating poverty is not a technical question (although technical contributions are very important): those engaged with the project of ending poverty need to have a political analysis and strategies that will promote the diffusion of an emerging international social norm - the existence of extreme poverty in an affluent world is morally unacceptable.