

Measuring development's 'ions'



"The World We Want" thematic consultation areas



When it comes to measuring ions, natural scientists have it easier than those working in international development. In natural science, defining ions and determining whether one is negative or positive is a basic process. The 'ions' of development are much more difficult to define or measure, yet are as fundamental to the process as the ions of nature.

Ion 1: Participation

Last week, I participated in the Global Dialogue on the Rule of Law and the Post-2015 Development Agenda, organised by the United Nations Development Programme. Practitioners and researchers from all over the world hunkered down for two days to think of useful targets that might be set as global development goals after the current set expires in 2015. My working group focussed on how to improve legal empowerment, and then how to measure that improvement.

It's easy to be cynical about such a process. Two years before a decision will be made on the next set of global goals, interest groups, UN agencies and frankly everyone else, are exploring ways to ensure that their interests and their buzzwords are somehow reflected in the goals. Having one's work reflected in the post-2015 development agenda will translate directly into funding opportunities.

My group quickly launched into a spirited debate on how best to measure participation —one important 'ion' of development—in developing national and local justice systems.

The debate shifted towards the question of what other ambitious goals we might want to suggest, particularly goals that right now we do not even fully understand, or know how to measure progress towards. At that point it struck me that we were just doing something that, as a goal, must have seemed visionary in 2000.

Ion 2: Consultation

I was in a room with people from every continent and from a vast range of backgrounds. This is remarkable, considering that the last round of development goals was pretty much decided on in a small room by a group of men— at least that's how those who were around at the time describe the process. The notion of a detailed global consultation—another 'ion'—did not figure.

The current set of Millennium Development Goals have fallen short of expectations in many ways; whether including justice and security in the next goals is a good idea is something I am undecided about.



Yet as we were debating whether to include a measure for participation in our draft suggestions, I thought how successful an MDG would have been, had participation and consultation been included in a global development agenda in a serious way.

Genuine consultation on the big global questions remains an ambition, but it would be unfair to dismiss the efforts towards it. That engaging diverse voices is now firmly entrenched in a notion of development is an important procedural step.

Ion 3: Ambition and Vision

Nonetheless, there are huge challenges in this process of consultation. I was struck how difficult it was for all of us to move away from development jargon, and from suggesting as an ambition things that in reality were the famous 'low-hanging fruit'. The notion of global universal goals does remain troubling to me, as does the prospect of the international political processes that are supposed to turn ideas developed during consultations, such as the one in which I just participated, into ambitious development goals, probably shedding a lot of complexity and nuance along the way. Yet, despite all the drawbacks, the ions of development can help in maintaining as much nuance and ambition as possible.

In chemistry, an ion can have a positive or a negative charge, depending on whether it has lost or gained an electron. This is easily measurable. In global thinking exercises such as the Global Dialogue, the 'ions' of participation, consultation and ambition are challenging to measure; it is often unclear whether they are positive or negative; and indeed it is easy to ridicule the process. **But not engaging in it, dismissing it, and presuming that the lowest common denominator will win in any case, lacks possibly the most important ion of all: vision.**

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