

Intelligence MEMOS



From: John Richards
To: Hon. Marie-Claude Bibeau
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Re: GAMING THE MDGS

In May, Marie-Claude Bibeau, Minister of International Development, announced a policy review of Canada's international assistance policy. This is a worthwhile initiative, but it will bear fruit only if it prompts blunt discussion of governance. In the minister's [Backgrounder](#) is mention of governance as a potential problem, but it is fleeting.

What is "governance"? A short definition is the ability of governments to deliver what they promise, whether it be rule of law, respect for human rights, control of corruption, or provision of decent schools and health clinics. Underlying the idea is an emphasis on whether public institutions can be counted on to perform.

A relevant example. I have been researching for many years social policy in Bangladesh, a fascinating country of 160 million that, unfortunately, suffers from very poor governance – as measured by organizations such as the World Bank. In 2000 the UN announced the Millennium Development Goals, an ambitious set of social policy outcomes to be realized by 2015. The second goal (MDG2 in the jargon) was to realize universal primary education in all countries by 2015. Bangladesh is typical of countries that "gamed" the goal. Over the previous decade, the government increased the enrolment of children in relevant age cohorts to over 90%. However, children dropped out or repeated grades at a rate such that, until 2009, only half completed the primary school cycle (of five years). Rather than devote more resources to schools and improve school quality, the government introduced in 2009 a mandatory national primary education completion exam, and graded it such that 95% of students sitting the exam passed. Lo and behold, Bangladesh's primary school completion rate rose between 2008 and 2013 from 50% to nearly 80%.

Large-scale field studies reveal that, to be optimistic, a third of students in grade five are performing at grade five level in reading Bangla and in mathematics. For understandable reasons, UNESCO stopped publishing school completion rates for Bangladesh after 2011 – and due to similar misgivings over gaming MDG2, UNESCO publishes no data for India.

There is no social policy goal more important than achieving universal literacy. And Canada can play a role in realizing education goals in selected countries. The Social Development Goals are the sequel to the MDGs. If Canada's contribution to the SDGs is to be more effective than under the MDGs, attention to governance must be more than fleeting.

John Richards is a professor at Simon Fraser University, and is a Fellow-in-Residence at the C.D. Howe Institute