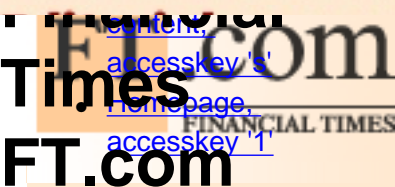


Editorial comment



Print

Poverty: what counts

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There has been plenty of sound and fury over poverty relief and international development in the past 18 months. Signifying nothing? That is a question few people seem to be interested in asking. This is a shame. If what gets measured gets done, we should be worried about how little measurement is taking place in the field of international development.

For four years, the Washington-based Center for Global Development has been a notable exception, publishing an index that ranks 21 rich countries based on how likely their policies are to promote development. It is an informative exercise, both because of what it shows and because of what is conspicuous by its absence.

The index always aimed to draw attention to a simple point: aid flows are not the be all and end all of a country's development commitment. Many people now realise that the trade policy of rich countries matters for the poor, but the same is true of other policies. Do countries try to poach only Rwandan doctors or do they allow labourers to come and to send money home? Are they selling arms to Angola or keeping seas free of pirates?

In spite of all the promises to help the poor since last summer's Group of Eight industrialised nations summit at Gleneagles, the CGD index is fractionally worse than last year. Earlier gains, such as the dismantling of textile quotas, have not been matched this year. Aid has risen but much-vaunted debt relief barely registers on an objective scale, while the CGD heavily discounts aid to Iraq and Israel, among many other places, on the grounds that it is unlikely to relieve much poverty.

The CGD offers the traditional league table. The Netherlands comes in first, by its reckoning; Denmark, Sweden and Norway are close behind, all scoring strongly in most categories. The US languishes in the bottom half of the table, partly because of its stingy and self-serving aid programme; the UK is there too as an inveterate arms dealer. And Japan, as always, is last. Everyone can find something to boast about - and something to be ashamed of.

Yet what this account leaves out is just as telling as what it includes. The CGD index makes plausible but unproven assumptions to produce most of its numbers. Aid to poorly governed countries is partially discounted, but perhaps it should be negative? There are many experts who think that in such circumstances aid does more harm than good. What if the aid is designed to improve governance? The harsh truth is that no one knows if this aid works either.

It is astonishing that we still know so little about what sort of aid works. Donors - and their critics - are too quick to embrace the latest fashion and too slow to ask the hard questions about what really works in development. Perhaps they feel they already know the answer, or perhaps they are afraid of what might be revealed.

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