Draft

Slouching Towards Flatland

Reflections on the Millennium Development Goals and Beyond

by Zaid Hassan | September 2007 | Version 3.2

"And what rough beast, its hour come round at last / slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"

> \- WB Yeats

"If your life has not three dimensions, if you don't live in the body, if you live in the two-dimensional plane in the paper world that is flat and printed, as if you were only living your biography, then you are nowhere. You don't see the archetypical world, but live like a pressed flower in the pages of a book, a mere memory of yourself."

> \- *Nietzsche's Zarathustra*, Carl G. Jung

"Imagine a vast sheet of paper on which straight Lines, Triangles, Squares, Pentagons, Hexagons, and other figures, instead of remaining fixed in their places, move freely about, on or in the surface, but without the power of rising above or sinking below it, very much like shadows -- only hard and with luminous edges -- and you will then have a pretty correct notion of my country and countrymen. Alas, a few years ago, I should have said "my universe": but now my mind has been opened to higher views of things."

> \- *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, Edwin A. Abbott

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India is the land of my grandparents and a country my family has fled from several times. For some reason, it keeps calling us back. In 2006 I was involved the delivery of an ambitious development project in India. Its initial stated goal was to halve the rate of child malnutrition in India within ten years. There are some 100 million children in India that suffer from some form of under-nutrition. The goals of this project were derived from and closely linked to the MDGs – in particular those relating to women and children.

The project took roughly three years to put together. A large part of this time was spent talking to stakeholders and funders. Stakeholders largely consisted of government officials (including some panchayat leaders), corporate executives and civil society leaders. Part of the reason this phase of the project took three years was that in its earliest conception the project was to be located in India, without a decision being made about where exactly in India. Over the course of this time the geographic focus of the project emerged – with factors such as political support and infrastructure being key determinants for where to start work. The project ultimately involved a number of Indian institutions, including various departments from the Government of Maharashtra, a UN agency, a small number of corporations, a number of NGOs, a New York based development NGO and us.

In many conversations with stakeholders and funders a power-point was used to frame and explain the project, its scope and its reason for being. A set of the MDGs relating to women and child development in India were used near the start of the presentation. The "indicators" concerning the question of India meeting its MDGs came from UNICEF, part of the UN system that conceived the MDGs. This data showed that India was not going to meet these goals. In the meetings that I sat in, I remember many questions being asked, such as where the funding would come from and so on, but I have no recollection of the goals ever being questioned nor the data ever being queried even though they were a key part of framing the project. The Economist itself, staunch defender of the market-as-solution, points out the attraction of MDG-think,

"This MDG-think is seductive. It is a potent mix of inspiration (saving lives and educating minds is eminently doable) and accusation (why, then, is the rich world not doing it?). But this thinking is also misleading. However laudable, the goals wrongly invite people to think of development as akin to an "engineering problem", as Lant Pritchett, now of Harvard University, and Michael Woolcock of the World Bank have argued. The task is to pour money in one end of the MDG pipeline and then count the tubewells and school enrolments emerging from the other."[1]

The MDGs themselves and the whole business of tracking indicators can be thought of as an intellectual and cognitive exercise belong to a very peculiar universe, one that many people in at least the West are increasingly choosing to live within (and one that most people in the non-West do not yet live within). The MDGs come from a way of being and thinking, from a place, that can be thought of as "Flatland" a two-dimensional, self-referential, closed universe defined by the boundaries of reports and power-point presentations.

Edwin Abbot's classic book *"Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions"* is the story of an inhabitant of a two-dimensional world. It explains what life is like in such a place a story the inhabitants of a two-dimensional world sketches the qualities of this world. In a Flatland universe a sphere can only be perceived as a circle. In a Flatland paradigm people are not people but statistical cases, suffering from "grade 1,2,3 or 4 malnutrition" or simply "ill" – not whole people.

People do not live in power-point presentations. People are not categories. People are not shadows. Or are they?

The Government of India runs one of the largest development projects in the world, Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS). ICDS has an 2007-2008 annual budget of Rs 4761 crore[2] (USD$1,185,212,845.41) or just under USD$1.2

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[1] http://www.economist.com/world/displaystory.cfm?story_id=9440765

[2] Source: http://indiabudget.nic.in/ub2007-08/high.htm 2007/08 Budget Summary: Plan expenditure at Rs.205,100 crore; Non-Plan Expenditure (net of the SBI share acquisition) at Rs.435,421 crore with increase over 2006-07 of only 6.5%; Revenue deficit estimated at Rs.71,478 crore (1.5% of GDP) and fiscal deficit at Rs.150,948 crore (3.3% of GDP).

billion. On paper there are ICDS centres that sometimes don't exist in the real world. One ICDS centre I went to looked like a fire-bombed wreck. The young doctor showing us around shrugged and said that these things sometimes only exist on paper, or they really exist (that is, have a building and a worker) but the food that is meant to be arrive never makes it because it's siphoned off along the way.

The workers who run ICDS are required to fill in reams and reams of paper-work, which all get shuffled vertically up the chain of command. The workers who collect the data never really know what it's for or how it will be used. Decisions are made on the basis of this "data" far, far away from the collection point. But often the "data" is inaccurate. In one ICDS centre I saw a chart that said one thing (that there was no Grade Three of Four malnutrition in her village) with the worker talking near a child that was almost certainly suffering from Grade Three or Four malnutrition (determined by height to weight ratios). Suffice to say the "data" sometimes has nothing to do with reality and is always an extremely poor representation of reality. ICDS sits on the ground but is run out of Flatland. The bureaucrats who run it live in a massive parallel universe of paper and "data".

Entire projects live and die in Flatland, never really coming to grasp that the real world (or the world of "Space" as Abbot calls it) does not consist of circles and squares, but spheres and cubes, not of statistics but people of flesh and blood who have their own beliefs and thoughts and feelings. Unfortunately, armies of governmental, corporate and NGO staff labour in Flatland, dealing not with reality but with a parallel universe of intellectual abstractions, that is, people as categories, treating development as an engineering problem. Work in Flatland consists of creating cognitive categories and then treating these categories as reality, building an entire world with categories as building blocks. From time-to-time this world of Flatland intersects with the real world, not by design, mostly by accident.

In India, we took individuals out into communities (for three nights) to engage with the world. We took them to engage their senses directly in the phenomenon of malnutrition (as opposed to the epiphenomenon of malnutrition represented

by documents and power-point presentations.) This was a challenging process. Initially, many people objected to this activity. Should we not instead sit in the office and listen to presentations from the experts on malnutrition? Why do we have to go and live in a village without plumbing, without proper amenities? Why can't we stay in a hotel? What can we learn there? Why had we not given them a list of questions and then they would simply go and collect the data?

Once the shock of the situation wore off, the group I was with (which included government officials, a medical doctor, two young corporate executives, an NGO worker with impressive academic credentials in nutrition but no experience "in the field") generally began appreciating the experience of engaging with real people without any specific data-gathering agenda (or agenda-shaped space for that matter). Simple engagements revealed complex issues, for example one participant reported "It was revealed that the Anganwadi (ICDS) worker who herself was illiterate did have the material but didn't use it out of fear that the kids would tear it all up." The fact that the worker was illiterate and was worried about losing training material (and so never used it) raises a great many practical questions about the success or failure of nutritional programmes on the ground. If the worker was illiterate then how was she coping with the reporting requirements? If the worker was not using the materials then what was she doing about teaching people about malnutrition?

More than simple insights into the nature of the "system that produces malnutrition" we all got a rich, visceral, body-centric insight into the reality of malnutrition – whether we liked it or not. We experienced the heat and the dust and the thirst of malnutrition. Speaking for myself, I felt that until I had lain on a string-cot, parched in the searing afternoon heat, trying to protect my ears and eyes from a dust storm, I did not know what the reality of malnutrition was.

This kind of exposure, unfortunately, is extremely rare in the world of Flatland. Three nights within a community was considered a large investment of time, whereas years behind a desk is considered acceptable. In my experience

development professionals rarely hang out[3], pay attention to and make friends with the villagers or communities they are meant to serve (unless of-course they are anthropologists doing "field-work" or somehow a part of the community itself). If this happens it is generally an accident, not seen as relevant to the goals of a project. At best they might run a PRA type programme and at worst they might fly in and out, speak some platitudes and roar off in cloud of dust.

As we made our way through our project and the stress of presenting to champions[4] what we had come up with mounted we retreated further and further into Flatland. Planning actions on paper, creating power-point presentations and so on became more important that anything we had seen, anything that we might feel or the relationships we had built. Intriguingly, Edward Tufte, a fierce critic of power-point makes the following case:

"Why should the structure, activity, and values of a large commercial bureaucracy be a useful metaphor for our presentations? Are there worse metaphors? Voice-mail menu systems? Billboards? Television? Stalin?

The pushy PP style tends to set up a dominance relationship between speaker and audience, as the speaker makes power points with hierarchical bullets to passive followers. Such aggressive, stereotyped, over-managed presentations – the Great Leader up on his pedestal – are characteristic of hegemonic[5] systems *and of Conway's Law[6] again in operation...*

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[3] Ethnographers and anthropologists, of course, claim to do just this. However, there are three challenges faced by anthropologists (1) wherever immersion into a community or situation is driven by an agenda, it becomes intensely difficult to determine if an individual is simply gathering and selecting data in order to support a pre-formed hypothesis, (2) anthropologists are academically trained in segmentation (medical anthropology, anthropology of development, social anthropology and so on) not is seeing wholes, (3) Finally, ethnographers all too often bring their experiences back into the academic world of text and lose the somatic nature of their experiences over time, let alone possessing any hope of communicating them non-textually (for example through performance). We require much more rigourous training in how to simply "see" without judgement.

[4] These were senior figures from participating institutions who came into the project from time to time.

[5] "Distinct from a view that casts the operation of power in the political field exclusively in terms of blocs which vie with each other in terms of policy questions, hegemony emphasises the ways in which power operates to form our everyday understanding of social relations, and to orchestrate the ways in which we consent to (and reproduce) those tacit and covert relations of power. Power is not stable or static, but is remade at various junctures within everyday life; it constitutes our tenuous sense of common sense, and is

> The Roman state bolstered its authority and legitimacy with the trappings of ceremony...Power is a far more complex and mysterious quality than any apparently simple manifestations of it would appear. It is as much a matter of impression, of theatre, of persuading those over whom authority is wielded to collude in their subjugation. Insofar as power is a matter of presentation, its cultural currency in antiquity (and still today) was the creation, manipulation and display of images. In the propagation of the imperial office, at any rate, art was power."[7]

In other words, the power-dynamics and the hierarchy of large hegemonic bureaucracies are embedded in and particularly well-suited to Flatland tools, particularly power-point. Power-point then becomes the language, the iconography, that shapes and moulds thought within Flatland.

As the pressure mounted, we tacitly decided to play by the rules, to collude with the power-structures of Flatland by talking to them in the language of Flatland. We were human beings behaving, increasingly as the project went on, like bureaucrats. It would have, perhaps, been more helpful (and required more courage) to the people we wanted to help to be human beings behaving like human beings[8].

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ensconced as the prevailing epistemes of a culture. Moreover, social transformation occurs not merely by rallying mass numbers in favour of a cause, but precisely through the ways in which daily social relations are rearticulated, and new conceptual horizons are opened up by anomalous or subversive practices. The theory of performativity is not far from the theory of hegemony in this respect; both emphasize the way in which the social world is made – and new social possibilities emerge – at various levels of social action through a collaborative relation with power". - Judith Butler, Restaging the Universal in Contingency, Hegemony and Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left, pp 13-14

[6] "An organisation which designs a system...will inevitably produce a design whose structure is a copy of the organization's communication structure."

[7] Metaphors for Presentations: Conway's Law Meets PowerPoint, Edward Tufte
(http://www.edwardtufte.com/bboard/q-and-a-fetch-msg?msg_id=000250)

[8] In hindsight, looking back at the years of meetings – we pursued a mixed combination of deep listening (what we called "Deep Dialogue Interview" and presentations. During many power-point presentations we made during the course of developing the project, we were propagating a power-dynamic very particular to the Flatland paradigm – we were effectively making use of the dominance that gets created between speaker and audience in order to convince stakeholders to support our project. The listening on the other hand is probably what worked much better to convince people we were genuine.

What it means to behave like a human being, however, is becoming harder and harder to grasp. Flatland is not simply manifested in power-point presentations but in our very biology itself. Nikolas Rose in *"The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century"* points out a historical flattening of what it means to be human, "The "biology" that came into existence in the nineteenth century was a biology of "depth." It tried to discover the underlying organic laws that lay behind and determined the functioning of closed living systems. But contemporary biology operates, at least in part, in a "flattened" field of open circuits." The use of visualisation techniques, starting with "X-Rays, through to mammograms, ultrasound, fetal images, and for the brain, EEG traces, PET. SPECT, fMRI scans and many more..." have "rendered the organic interior body visible." In the interventions then "that proliferate in this flattened world, almost any vital element can, in principle, be freed from its ties to cell, organ, organism, or species, set free to circulate and be combined with any other, provided certain conditions are met. An epistemological change, then, and perhaps also an ontological change is in process."

Rose (referring to Ian Hacking) raises the disturbing prospect that we may have to reassess critiques of Cartestian dualism. Now that "...new surgical techniques enable a person to consciously observe doctors re-engineering their organs in real time, on the operating room monitor, reinforce the idea of an analogue body, with interchangeable parts, distinct from the mind. We are, he suggests, becoming Cartestian – our body is indeed as it was already envisaged by Descartes." Flatland is not simply a metaphor. It is real.

Within the context of our project, notions of what it means to be healthy all came from textbooks, reflecting the epistemological and ontological change that Rose refers operating within a development context. For example, I found it fascinating to hear many professionals talk about how malnutrition affects IQ – when in fact IQ as a concept has long been discredited[9] and has no analog outside

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[9] For a thorough demolition of the concept of IQ, see for example, "The Mismeasure of Man" – Stephen Jay Gould or, simply talk to a child that has been labelled "malnourished" and try to detect an "IQ deficiency".

of Flatland. The complexity of how food affects cognitive development and the link to behaviour is just that, complex. Yet, the biology of children is being configured on the basis of normalised notions such as IQ. Why? Why not look at the real world? Why not "close the textbooks and open our eyes?"[10]

Our project became a microcosm of the larger systems that it was attempting to shift. Our goals were not owned by the people that were most affected by them and neither are the MDGs. The voices of the people who, at least in theory, are most affected by the MDGs, are nowhere to be found. They have not signed up to the MDGs and for good reason. They are ghosts in the wider UN system and the universe of Flatland.

From conception (by a visionary Dutch business-man) to execution (led by a "visionary" non-Indian team – including me) – the goals and processes for the project were not set by the people most closely involved in delivering the project or affected by the project. In other words, many of the people involved "on the ground" – the stakeholders, the Indian facilitators, the communities – never had any voice in the conception of the most important parameters of the project. Consequently they never really owned it. When things got hard, they understandably shrugged. Why should they risk and fight for something that never gave them a voice? That they did not conceive? That did not reflect their dreams and aspirations? When they are not being seen as whole people?

The leaders (Indian and non-Indian) that conceived and designed the project – within the context of a highly bureaucratized, hierarchical system were all very well intentioned and serious about the project. They were deeply concerned about the status of children. What they and we profoundly failed to understand and internalize was one relatively simple thing. People are capable of extraordinary creativity, courage and determination when they have the agency to set their own path, create their own goals and design their own processes. Goals set far away in foreign countries, processes designed by foreigners, decisions made by technocrats in the centres of power do not start bush-fires of creativity and

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[10] Hernando de Soto, Massive Change interview.

determination. In short when people have ownership then they are capable of addressing the most complex of challenges.

To continue working in Flatland means that the glory of spheres and cubes, of the human condition, will have been reduced to circles and squares and categories. Why should we accept such a poor view of the world? For whom? Should we not try and wake ourselves from the 2-dimensional dream-state of Flatland? Should we not live in the world of Space? Should we abandon our bodies?

However, this engagement is not what we are trained for. It is possible to get a graduate degree in nutrition without ever seeing malnutrition or even practicing good nutrition yourself. Nutrition has been disconnected from the body. Our schools and our universities train us to deal with epiphenomenon; with charts, with power-point, with numbers, with words, with images – with Flatland. I am starting to see how this training re-enforces the power-structures and dynamics of hegemonic systems of control. Fortunately, these systems of control will never really succeed at forcing people to own goals that are alien to them. Yet they continue trying, spending billions in the process[11] and probably failing to shift situations that are, to put it mildly, deeply unjust. If we are genuinely interested in change then we will muster up the courage to question our own systems and ask ourselves why we have retreated into the paucity of Flatland[12].

The question of why we and I, in particular, retreated into Flatland is a question I continue to carry with me and puzzle over. Yeats' question, *"And what rough beast, its hour come round at last / slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"* raises the question for me of what a retreat into Flatland will mean, of what beast will be born? What happens when we abandon our bodies, when we become

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[11] Aid from 22 countries comes in at just under USD$80 billion[11] (excluding debt relief.) Source: The Economist. This is also not counting foundational and civil society funding such as The Gates Foundation (with a $33 billion endowment).

[12] This retreat can be examined historically. The entwined history of development and of modern medicine provide us with a rich vein of enquiry as to the causes of our collective, civilizational retreat into Flatland. See *"The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich as told to David Cayley"* (2005) for a clear, detailed, original and startling discussion on the origins of the development mindset that produces Flatland.

disembodied people? What are we giving up? It raises questions of courage and of fear, of power and powerlessness, of hope and hopelessness. As I contemplate these questions I feel a chill running down my spine, I feel a dull fear in the pit of my stomach. What are we giving up here? What is the cost?

As long as development projects and efforts remain housed within institutions, bound by the myriad of rules and constraints that govern institutions, they will continue to generate disembodied people, ghosts. Somehow, as we witness the pain of malnutrition (or AIDS or any other countless human sufferings) we must figure out how to bring our very human response back into our bodies, into our hearts and guts, we must figure out what a human, embodied response looks like, rather than a disembodied, institutional response[13]. We must figure out how to meet human beings as human beings, as friends, not as clients or statistics. How do we put our bodies back into the suffering we witness? What, in other words, does a response to human suffering characterised by "bodily depth" look like?

It has become clearer and clearer to me that the work I am engaged in involves building our capacities to cope with phenomenon – that is, the mess of the world, "the swamp," the heat, the smell, the emotionality, the conflict and all the things that come from engaging as whole people with whole people. This means leaving our desks, holding our models lightly and engaging our senses. The reward being work that is deeply rooted in the complexity of the world, owned by the people who are affected by them (instead of opaque, unaccountable agencies).

The tragedy of our project in India is not simply that it failed in any conventional sense, although it's highly doubtful that it will meet its own stated goals. Rather it

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[13] Robert Chambers, who helped develop Participatory Rural Appraisal, makes the following case "The neglect of the personal dimension in development at first sight seems bizarre. It is self-evident to the point of embarrassment that most of what happens is the result of what sort of people we are, how we perceive realities, and what we do and do not do. Whether change is good or bad is largely determined by personal actions, whether by political leaders, officials, professionals or local people, by international currency speculators, executives of transnational corporations, non-government organisation (NGO) workers, or researchers, by mothers, fathers or children, or by soldiers, secret agents, journalists, lawyers, police, or protesters. Especially, what happens depends on those who are powerful and wealthy. One might have supposed then that trying to understand and change their perceptions, motivations and behaviours would have been at the centre of development and development studies, and a major concern for the IMF, the World Bank, other donor agencies, governments and NGOs." (Ideas for development: Reflecting Forwards, Chamber, 2004, Institute for Development Studies)

points us to a simultaneously more disturbing and hopeful trajectory of failure. The greater tragedy is that we abandoned the phenomenological foundations that we started with and instead embraced Flatland as a paradigm, as a way of engaging with the world. In doing so, I believe, we ensured that it will fail. This failure, while tragic, should not necessarily be cause for despair. Within its highly institutionalised context, our experiences hint at a potentially profound transformation in the nature of power. We find ourselves confronting the growing powerlessness of our institutions, both public[14] and private[15], to tackle our most complex challenges. Instead of despairing, we might ponder, what human freedoms might flower[16] as a result of this growing powerlessness[17]?

On the other hand, the tragedy of the MDGs is not that they won't be met. Rather it's that so many people with eyes and ears, with the senses to perceive and engage in the world, will have to dim their perceptions in order to operate in Flatland and continue to campaign strongly for others to do the same, that so many people are willing to become disembodied people, that so many people will live their lives, "like a pressed flower in the pages of a book."

[14] The evidence for this is not purely anecdotal, take public services (and see subsequent footnote) - "There is a perceived crisis in the ability of government to deliver improved performance in key areas of public service – particularly crime, education, health and transport. Part of the difficulty is that the recipients of these services, the public, are becoming more aware of their own needs and aspirations and of the inadequacies of the services with which they are provided. Another source of difficulty is the growing disillusionment with government, which to many appears to spend more time putting a positive 'spin' on bad news than on generating genuine progress or good news. At the same time the professions involved in the key public services – teachers, doctors, the police – are becoming more vocal in their objection to government policy, the ever-increasing administrative load imposed on them and the loss of quality in their work. In addition to these public issues and disputes an increasing number of voices are questioning the prevailing approach to policy design and implementation. These range from those who criticise 'control freakery' to those who question the intellectual foundations of policy-making. The world has become more complex, more interconnected, more global and less predictable." - "Systems Failure: Why Governments Must Learn to Think Differently" by Jake Chapman (Demos 2004)

[15] "The old institutional structure has indeed been taken apart in the special realm of flexible organisations. In its place comes a new geography of power, the center controlling the peripheries of power in institutions with ever fewer intermediate layers of bureaucracy. This new form of power eschews institutional authority, has low social capital. Deficits of loyalty, informal trust, and accumulated institutional knowledge result in cutting edge organisations." – "The Culture of New Capitalism" – Richard Sennet (2006)

[16] See for example, "Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Movement In the World Came Into Being and Why No One Saw it Coming", by Paul Hawken. Viking Press New York (2007) A lecture based on the book can be found at http://beagle.monkeybrains.net/longnow/salt-recordings/salt-020070608-hawken/salt-020070608-hawken-web.mp3

[17] "Perhaps, indeed, revolt against this enfeebled culture will constitute our next fresh page." (Sennet 2006)