

POLITICAL SCIENCE

Substitution in development goals

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Large international development initiatives, such as the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals, aim to reduce poverty and drive human progress by providing governments with a set of benchmarks to achieve within a fixed timeframe. However, the influence of such metrics on government behaviour is not always straightforward.

A new study by James Bisbee, of New York University, and colleagues finds that development metrics can be associated with changes in government investments and progress, but sometimes in undesirable ways. The authors analysed international primary and secondary school enrolment rates between 1980 and 2014 and found that the launch of the Millennium Development Goals was associated with increased primary school enrolment, but also with a substitution effect. That is, governments increased rates of primary school education by diverting resources that might otherwise have been spent on secondary education, which was not a target of the Millennium Development Goals. This substitution effect was smaller for more accountable governments, suggesting that increased transparency and democracy can lessen the temptation for governments to make progress towards their goals by taking resources away from other areas of development.

The study highlights the importance of considering development goals holistically and remaining alert for potential costs to other aims.

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