Recent international conferences have reflected a renewed interest in development. Among the most notable have been the 2001 Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization in Doha, Qatar, which launched the “development round” of talks on trade liberalization; the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa; and the 2002 International Conference on Financing for Development in Monterrey, Mexico, which resulted in the Monterrey Consensus on the international agenda for development.

The Monterrey Consensus focuses on increasing international cooperation to reduce poverty in developing countries by:
- Improving policies and outcomes in these countries.
- Delivering more—and more effective—aid from donor countries.
- Improving market access for exports from developing to industrial countries.

Advocates of the consensus see it as evidence of a stronger voice for developing countries in issues related to their development and of a renewed commitment by industrial countries to increase aid and market access. But critics claim that the Monterrey Consensus is little more than artifice—and that deep rifts between rich and poor countries prevent tangible progress.

Moreover, some observers have noted that despite broad areas of agreement, crucial issues remain outside the discussion. Others go further, saying that even if the Monterrey Consensus represents a new commitment to development, the effort is ultimately futile because the development model it promotes is fundamentally flawed. This note examines these issues and concludes that, though far from perfect, the Monterrey Consensus offers a genuine opportunity to forge a global partnership for development.

Is the consensus fair—and feasible?

The Monterrey conference was a significant step in advancing the development agenda. Developing countries claimed responsibility for their development, while industrial countries pledged financial assistance to make that development a reality.

The document that emerged from the conference—adopted by nearly 200 countries—addresses donor countries’ concerns about lack of accountability among recipient governments as well as recipients’ complaints about insufficient aid from donors (box 1). Although the UN Millennium Declaration of 2000 established broad consensus on the Millennium Development Goals, a commitment to the actions and financing required to achieve them was lacking. Monterrey forged that commitment—and established a structure of accountability for both industrial and developing countries.
But the news is not all good, and there is reason for skepticism about the agreement’s structure and its chances of becoming operational. The first seven Millennium Development Goals are primarily the responsibility of developing countries, while only the eighth (forming a global partnership for development) falls mainly on industrial countries, as noted by Evelyn Herfkens of the United Nations.

Furthermore, the first seven goals include an elegant system of targets, indicators, and timelines for monitoring progress. But the eighth goal—and the increased aid and trade reforms among OECD countries needed to achieve it—has no commensurate targets and timelines. Herfkens has noted that within the World Bank and other development institutions, an “army of people” is tracking developing countries’ progress. Yet no similar group is monitoring donor countries’ obligations.

The structural imbalance of the consensus has led some observers to question its potential for implementation. Many doubt that industrial countries have the political will to counter entrenched producer interests favoring trade barriers or to increase foreign aid to the stated goal of 0.7 percent of GNP. Formalizing indicators and monitoring the dates by which industrial countries boost market access to developing country exports and achieve the 0.7 percent goal for aid—in the same way that the first seven Millennium Development Goals are being quantified and monitored—would be a useful step toward effective implementation of the Monterrey Consensus. But as World Bank President James Wolfensohn has said, the essence of a global partnership for development is not in its quantifiable targets, but in the goodwill needed to make it a functional agreement.

The imbalance in the consensus also reflects a larger problem: limited voice for developing countries in development issues. Many critics have noted this lack of voice in the governance structures of international financial institutions, and so have expressed support for reforming these structures. Yet calling the Doha conference the “development round” and support for the Monterrey Consensus show that the voice of developing countries is increasing. More important, the consensus shows that developing countries will push forward regardless of the halting cooperation of industrial (OECD) countries. Indeed, for Ariel Buira, director of the G-24 Secretariat, the Monterrey Consensus is not so much an attempt at a balanced contract but a recognition by developing countries that “their development is their own responsibility,” with necessary complements provided by industrial countries in the form of increased aid and market access. Monterrey leaves no doubt—getting its house in order is the developing world’s top priority.

A consensus to move in the wrong direction?

Another criticism of the Monterrey Consensus goes beyond merely insisting on a balanced contract, instead assailing the development approach embodied in the consensus. These critics claim that even if the consensus were a balanced contract between industrial and developing countries, it would merely be a consensus to move in the wrong direction.
In its focus on the Millennium Development Goals and their myriad quantifiable indicators, has the Monterrey Consensus forgotten the vital importance of growth? Although growth is implicitly required to achieve the development outcomes specified by the Goals, there is a danger that overemphasizing the Goals will detract from efforts to promote growth.

At best, looking at each Goal individually poses an obstacle to promoting comprehensive, multisector approaches to development. At worst, overemphasis on the Goals as isolated indicators to be achieved on a fixed timeline smacks of target planning in the mold of former centrally planned economies. The temptation to portray achieving the Millennium Development Goals as a direct product of increased aid could detract from a more sophisticated understanding of how economic growth affects efforts to reduce poverty and advance human development. Thus, the World Bank must remember its role: as Geoffrey Lamb, the Bank’s vice president for resource mobilization and cofinancing, has said, “Our job should be to make poor countries and low-income countries into normal countries, that is, countries which have endogenous and reasonably effective processes of capital accumulation and growth.”

The Bank should not allow the Monterrey Consensus to be misconstrued as a quid pro quo—money given by industrial countries in exchange for reforms and accountability in developing countries—which would essentially amount to “old-style conditionality come back,” in the words of Shanta Devarajan, staff director of the Bank’s World Development Report 2004. Development cannot occur without a vigorous private sector supported by foreign direct investment. Underscoring the lack of focus on growth at the Monterrey Consensus, therefore, are the forgotten roles of the private sector and foreign direct investment. Although both are mentioned in the document adopted at the conference, they have—in the view of some critics—received scant attention.

Given that foreign direct investment in developing countries is five times official development assistance, the development community overlooks such investment at its peril. In its efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, the Bank must take a leading role in forging public-private partnerships and ensuring that foreign direct investment is spread equitably throughout the developing world.

Another element of silence in the consensus is the vital role of knowledge and technology transfer in providing a foundation for sustained economic growth. As Devarajan says, policy and institutional reforms in developing countries are insufficient without the ability to scale up output—an abil-
“Development is going to happen as a result of a very close partnership between the private sector and the public sector.”
—Shahid Javed Burki, CEO, EMP Financial Advisors

ity that only knowledge and technology transfer can provide. Yet the Monterrey Consensus glosses over this vital issue, an indifference that could limit economic growth and undermine the effectiveness of the consensus. In response, Devarajan has called for a “systematic effort by the donor community to effect that knowledge transfer.” Future international forums should focus more explicitly on private sector growth, foreign direct investment, and knowledge and technology transfer to the developing world.

Any consensus on the consensus?
Wide-ranging criticism of the Monterrey Consensus suggests that the “consensus,” if not an outright misnomer, will at best require significant political maneuvering and resolve to ensure its proper functioning. Indeed, if there is agreement on anything, it is that industrial and developing countries have not yet arrived at the type of contract that, to paraphrase Bank President Wolfensohn, can be put in a drawer and forgotten because it works so well. As Herfkens has concluded, “the essence of all this is political will.”

Still, healthy skepticism should not give way to outright cynicism. The flaws in the consensus are not sufficient justification to condemn the entire approach or to scrap efforts at implementation. Instead, they provide cause to push for more (and more effective) aid, better policies and institutions, and increased market access for the developing world—in short, to make the promises of Monterrey functional. As Lamb has said, despite the many reasons for pessimism, the political moment is propitious: “It has become possible to hold industrial countries to account for some things in a way that was just not on the agenda before…and we have to capitalize on that, highly imperfect and highly sporadic though it is.”

This note was written by John Page (Director, Poverty Reduction, PREM Network) and Todd Pugatch (Junior Professional Associate, Office of the Vice President, PREM Network), based on the PREM Conference Plenary Session, “Partnerships for Fairer Development—Building an Effective Consensus: Monterrey, Doha, and the World’s Poor,” held 15 April 2003. All quotations in this note are drawn from that session. The session’s moderator was John Page; the panelists were Evelyn Herfkens, Shahid Javed Burki, Ariel Buira, Robert Wade, Shanta Devarajan, and Geoffrey Lamb.

If you are interested in similar topics, consider joining the Pro-Poor Growth and Inequality Thematic Group (contact Louise Cord, x30969), the Growth Thematic Group (contact Edgardo Favaro, x30599), or the Empowerment Community of Practice (contact Abigail Somma, x84949). For more information on Thematic Groups, visit PREMnet (http://prem).