The global discourse about human development is dominated by the formula that ‘faster economic growth + more foreign aid + better governance = MDGs’. The conventional view regards slow growth as the main reason why so many countries will miss the Millennium Development Goals by 2015. Others argue that it is insufficient foreign aid or inadequate governance that prevent so many countries from achieving the MDGs. In other words, human development is considered as either growth-, aid- or governance-mediated. Thus, the development narrative is reduced to a technical argument about these three aspects of development. To substantiate the argument, extensive use – if not misuse – is made of statistics. The latest poverty estimates of the World Bank, for example, claim that the absolute number of poor people in Africa declined between 2005 and 2008; this for the first time. Nine million fewer Africans living in poverty, is that not a reason to celebrate? Does it not prove that growth is reducing poverty?

The lecture will nuance this view; if not dismiss it altogether. It will be argued that reducing human poverty requires much more that growth, grants or governance. Foremost, human development involves fundamental transformation in society, which transcend any macroeconomic or institutional model. A parallel will be drawn between two leaders in the 17th century to illustrate that today’s conventional thinking is not always based on empirical evidence but more often on over-simplification, over-generalisation and over-abstraction. The lecture will debunk the claim that Africa’s performance is worse than that of the other regions. The oft-repeated statement that Africa is missing the targets is missing the point. The point is that Africa must not meet the MDGs for the world to meet them. Moreover, the region is contributing more than her fair share to global progress regarding most dimensions of human wellbeing.

Jan Vandemoortele was Director of the Poverty Group at UNDP in New York from 2001-05. It was during that period that he was the co-architect of the Millennium Development Goals. He has published widely on the MDGs. He served in various other capacities with the United Nations for over 30 years, both at headquarters and in the field – with UNICEF, UNDP, the ILO and on loan to the World Bank. His last position was as UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator to Pakistan. He holds a Ph.D. in Development Economics and is a regular speaker at international conferences and universities. He is member of various advisory groups, including to the UN Secretary-General and the Dutch State Secretary for development co-operation.