

Making the SDGs smarter



BJORN LOMBERG

Over the next 15 years, the Sustainable Development Goals will influence more than USD 2.5 trillion of money in development aid and trillions more meant to help reduce poverty, hunger and disease, and improve education and the environment. Bangladesh, along with all other nations, now has to decide where to spend scarce resources to do the most good. And clearly not all of the many, many UN targets are equally good, smart or effective.

Since its inception, the UN has had a lot of well-meaning targets, goals and declarations that have made very little impact. At the turn of this century, something remarkable happened when the UN hosted the Millennium Summit, where the largest gathering of world leaders in history agreed to a number of very specific promises, which ended up as the Millennium Development Goals, or the MDGs.

These covered the key areas of poverty, education, gender equality, child mortality, maternal health, disease, the environment, and global partnership.

The MDGs were not perfect, but they were simple, catchy and acceptable to all, with a clear deadline for 2015. International and national development efforts coalesced around the key goals, such as "halve the proportion of people in poverty from 1990 to 2015".

Bangladesh made excellent, swift progress on many MDGs. It focused on poverty alleviation, food security, infant death and maternal mortality. Poverty was reduced from 56.7 percent in 1991-92 to 24.8 percent in 2015, and the under-five mortality rate was 151 per 1000 live births in 1990 which came down to 41 per 1000 live births in 2013. The infant mortality rate was 94 per 1000 live births in 1990, which was reduced to 32 per 1000 live births in 2013.

A new study from the Brookings Institution finds that at least 21 million extra lives were saved due to accelerated progress because of the MDGs. The research finds that "especially on matters of life and death, 2015 outcomes were not on track to happen anyhow". Some shifts were dramatic, and Africa was responsible for many of the greatest incremental gains.

The MDGs fired the global imagination: With just a small number of simple targets, world leaders promised

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PEOPLE

- LOWER CHRONIC CHILD MALNUTRITION BY 40%
- HALVE MALARIA INFECTION
- REDUCE TUBERCULOSIS DEATHS BY 90%
- AVOID 1.1M HIV INFECTIONS THROUGH CIRCUMCISION
- CUT EARLY DEATH FROM CHRONIC DISEASE BY 1/3
- REDUCE NEWBORN MORTALITY BY 70%
- INCREASE IMMUNIZATION TO REDUCE CHILD DEATHS BY 25%
- MAKE FAMILY PLANNING AVAILABLE TO EVERYONE
- ELIMINATE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

PLANET

- PHASE OUT FOSSIL FUEL SUBSIDIES
- HALVE CORAL REEF LOSS
- TAX POLLUTION DAMAGE FROM ENERGY
- CUT INDOOR AIR POLLUTION BY 20%

PROSPERITY

- REDUCE TRADE RESTRICTIONS (FULL DOHA)
- IMPROVE GENDER EQUALITY IN OWNERSHIP, BUSINESS AND POLITICS
- BOOST AGRICULTURAL YIELD GROWTH BY 40%
- INCREASE GIRLS' EDUCATION BY TWO YEARS
- ACHIEVE UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA
- TRIPLE PRESCHOOL IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA



to help the poorest. Although not all goals were met, they helped push us to a much, much better place.

Where the MDGs succeeded, it was because they provided donors and governments with clarity over objectives.

Sadly, the UN decided to reinvent the wheel when it embarked on its process to replace the MDGs with what would become the Sustainable Development Goals.

The SDG process tried to be all things to all people. Aiming for inclusivity, the UN talked to everyone. However admirable that approach may be, it meant that the goals quickly expanded in scope. Indeed, at one early stage, almost 1400 new development targets were on the table, having been suggested by 120 different organisations.

The Copenhagen Consensus Center set out to improve the outcome and implementation of the SDGs, by commissioning sorely-needed economic evidence on the benefits and costs of the proposed solutions.

In total, peer-reviewed analyses were produced by 82 of the world's top economists and 44 sector experts. A Nobel laureate panel of economists prioritised many proposed targets in terms of their value-for-money.

Ultimately, the 8 goals and 21 targets of the Millennium Development Goals were replaced in September 2015 with an impossibly long list of 17 goals and 169 targets. This is far too many. Reading the final 15,000 word agenda, one might conclude the UN simply threw everything they had heard into the document.

The chief problem with this laundry list of targets is that trying to prioritise 169 things is very similar to prioritising nothing at all. Promising everything to everyone means that the targets give no help or direction for Bangladesh to focus its spending or attention.

The OECD has estimated that meeting all 169 specific development targets would cost USD 3.3-4.5 trillion annually – about the same as the United States' 2016 federal budget, and much, much more than the nearly USD 132 billion spent globally on overseas development aid last year.

Just one target alone – providing universal primary education – would require at least USD 17 billion of additional spending per year. Another – eradicating poverty – would require annual investments in infrastructure of USD 5-7 trillion globally according to a UN General Assembly intergovernmental committee.

In truth, estimates vary because nobody is quite sure how much the SDGs will cost. But what is clear is that few if any countries will be able to afford to do everything. Bangladesh will have to choose carefully

among the many beguiling targets to find the ones that do the most good.

This is no different from most donor countries where few are on track to increase development funding anytime soon. In the United Kingdom, voters want to renege on a previous foreign-aid commitment – amounting to 0.7 percent of GDP – by a margin of two to one. As a candidate, President Donald Trump said that the USA should "stop sending foreign aid to countries that hate us." And in Australia, the government has already slashed its aid budget to an all-time low, measured against gross national income.

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If we can't count on full funding for every SDG from either nations or development budgets, then we should spend what we have wisely.

A big problem area in the SDGs is with the targets that aim for absolute goals – the eradication of extreme poverty for example, or universal access to education, or the end to hunger. These are all noble aspirations, but unfortunately the evidence suggests these will all be practically impossible to reach in just 15 years, by 2030. In general, it pays to be wary of unrealistic, absolute aspirations and instead focus on achievable goals.

Now that the SDGs are being implemented, the Copenhagen Consensus research can be very helpful to the UN and governments like Bangladesh to achieve the most good possible.

It shows us clearly that focusing on some targets would achieve a huge deal, and others

very little. Spreading money and energy thinly among them reduces the overall good that we do.

When faced with too many choices, decision-makers should first focus on those targets that will do the most good.

Indeed, as the eminent panel of Nobel laureate economists found after studying the Copenhagen Consensus research, the world could achieve four-times more good if it sharpened the 169 targets to a list of just 19 "phenomenal" investments.

Achieving four-times as much with every dollar or taka would make a world of difference.

There is a compelling moral case for us all to focus first on the areas where the most good can be achieved.

Several of these 19 phenomenal targets help people directly through health benefits. Tuberculosis (TB) is a 'hidden' disease. Over two billion people carry the bacterium that causes it, about 10 percent of those people will develop TB at some point, and about 1.5 million people each year die from TB. But treatment is inexpensive and, in most cases, highly effective. Spending a dollar on diagnosis and treatment is a low-cost way to give many more years of productive life to many people. Ebola may get the headlines, but TB is a much bigger problem.

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There are excellent targets involving the planet as well. Governments around the world still subsidise the use of fossil fuels to the tune of over USD 500 billion each year. Cutting these subsidies would reduce pollution and free up resources for investments in health, education and infrastructure.

Protecting coral reefs turns out to be a surprisingly efficient target as well. There are benefits in terms of biodiversity, but healthy reefs also produce more tangible and immediate benefits. They increase fish stocks – benefiting both fishermen and consumers and attract visitors who explore their beauties – benefiting everyone working in the tourist industry, as well as the tourists themselves.

Perhaps the most important, over-arching problem facing the world is poverty, which still afflicts billions of people. Poverty is the ultimate source of many other problems. The immediate result is high rates of infant mortality, as well as poor cognitive skills and reduced

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