

## Making the SDGs smarter

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productive capacity among surviving children. The ultimate result is a cycle of poverty.

Better nutrition and better schools will help alleviate poverty, but there is another target that promises to be even more effective: lowering barriers to international trade. The historical evidence on this point is compelling. In China, South Korea, India, Chile and many other countries, reducing trade restrictions has lifted incomes and reduced poverty, and triggered decades of rapid income growth.

Poverty reduction was the first item in UN's list of Millennium Development Goals, and the numerical target was achieved. Why? Income growth in China was a big part of the story. And how did the Chinese achieve that remarkable feat? Most evidence suggests that international trade was a key ingredient. Trade produces immediate benefits by opening up markets, but it also facilitates the flow of ideas and technologies, producing even greater benefits over a longer horizon. A successful Doha free trade agreement could lift 160 million people out of extreme poverty.

This list of phenomenal targets will not solve all the world's problems, but neither can any list under realistic budgets. The list can concretely help the UN, and nations like Bangladesh, to make choices like a savvy shopper with limited funds.

Choosing good targets will vastly increase the benefits to people around the world, as well as generations to come. Governments should forgo the instant gratification of promising everything to everyone, and instead focus on choosing smart development goals.

The same approach can also be applied at a national level, as was done for Bangladesh over the last year. An Eminent Panel of Bangladesh development experts and a Nobel laureate economist considered an entire volume of



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new research commissioned by the Copenhagen Consensus Center – well over 1,000 pages of new evidence on the costs and benefits of Bangladeshi policy options.

As was shared with the readers of *The Daily Star*, the Eminent Panel highlighted three top priorities for Bangladesh.

The first of these, similar to the SDG research, was to step up the fight against Tuberculosis. TB kills 80,000 Bangladeshis each year. Halting this death toll would stop nearly one in every eleven Bangladeshi deaths. A cost-effective TB treatment strategy using

community health clinics would cost just Tk 7,850 per patient, and treating one person can save multiple lives. In total, each taka will achieve 21 taka of good.

Bangladesh should also focus on digital solutions, the Eminent Panel found. Making procurement more efficient would avoid delays and cost overruns and increase efficiency. Each taka spent on digital procurement will achieve 663 taka of good. In addition, creating electronic land records would provide an impressive 619 taka of benefits per taka spent.

And the other top policy endorsed for Bangladesh is infant nutrition.

Bangladesh has had great success fighting hunger, but there is more work to do. Stunting affects around 6 million Bangladeshi children under the age of five, decreasing cognitive development, and leading to worse health outcomes, school performance, and productivity. Programmes to fight malnutrition by delivering nutrients and micronutrients to young children and pregnant mothers would see stunting fall from 36 percent to an estimated 29 percent—averting stunting in roughly 450,000 children.

Focusing on the costs and benefits can help at a national level for

Bangladesh, but it can also help globally, especially for the SDGs. Poverty, hunger, disease, education and the environment are all far too important for us to simply say that good intentions are good enough. We should focus on achieving the most that we can with every dollar or taka that we spend.

*The writer is director of the Copenhagen Consensus Center, author of The Skeptical Environmentalist, Cool It, and The Nobel Laureates' Guide to the Smartest Targets for the World 2016-2030, and a visiting professor at Copenhagen Business School.*



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