

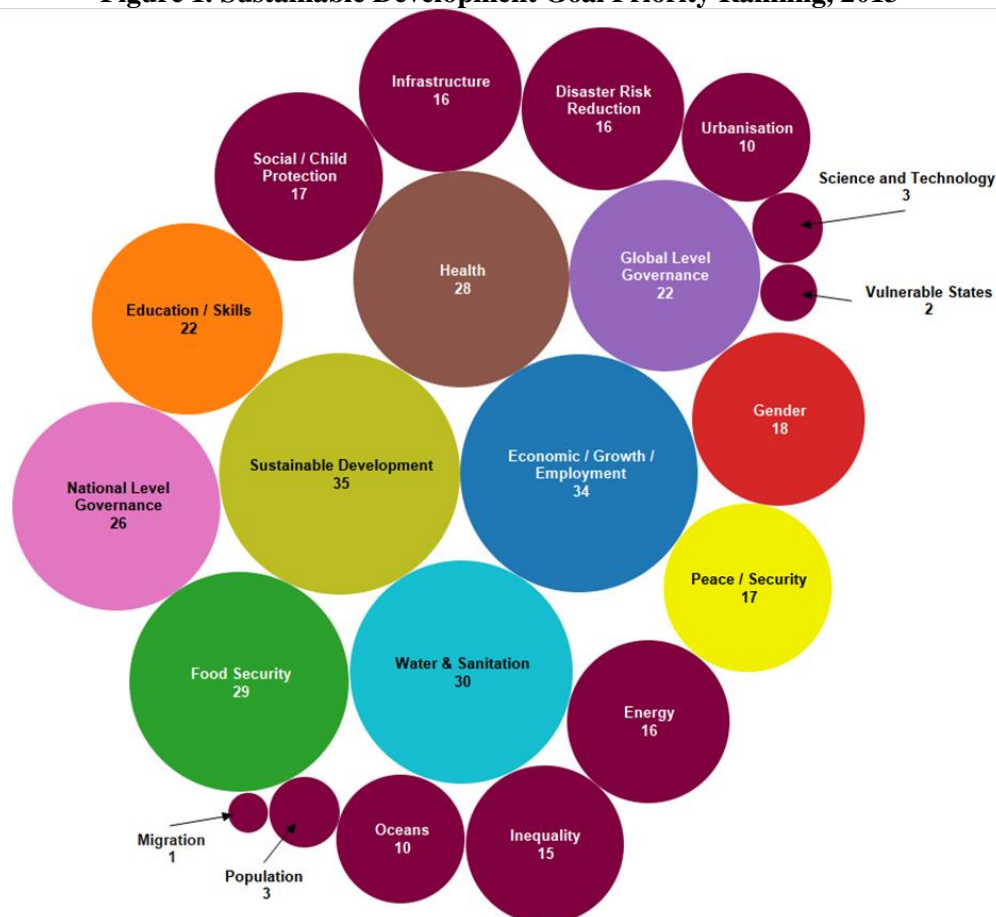


A Path to the Future: Establishing Sustainable Development Goals

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After fifteen years guiding international efforts to alleviate poverty, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted in 2001, will expire in 2015. The MDGs were an enormous success for the international community, helping donor governments to coordinate aid and development assistance, and helping recipient countries to present coordinated requests for assistance. One result was the greatest progress to reduce the effects of poverty. But an estimated one billion people still live in extreme poverty, leaving much to be accomplished.

Figure 1. Sustainable Development Goal Priority Ranking, 2013



Source: 'What do we know about the world's proposals for post-2015 goals? First analysis from the Future Goals Tracker', 16 May 2013

At Rio+20, the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, held in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012, there was agreement by Member States to launch a new process to develop a set of sustainable development goals (SDGs). In July 2014, the UN Open Working Group on Sustainable Development

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Goals completed a proposal proposed set 17 SGD, with 169 targets, covering a broad range of sustainable development issues, including ending poverty and hunger, improving health and education, making cities more sustainable, combating climate change, and protecting oceans and forests.¹

The MDGs are not without criticism. It has been widely noted that much of the progress they helped guide came at the expense of the environment, with greater industrial pollution, waste, deforestation and destruction of fisheries.² Poverty was being alleviated, but at the expense of long-term progress. Thus at Rio it was agreed the future progress must devote greater attention to sustainable development.³

Sustainable development is a controversial theme. Although there is wide-spread agreement on the need to make success last, there is deep controversy over who pays the costs and how they affect the pace of development. Sustainable development has been pressed most aggressively by donor countries, especially Australia, Canada, Europe and Japan, and by many prominent NGOs, especially environmental NGOs.

Virtually all states and NGOs favor the SDGs, but there is enormous disagreement over how ambitious they should be and who should bear the costs. Sustainability has been resisted to varying degrees by countries of the Non-Aligned Movement, especially those who see no alternative to accepting greater pollution and environmental change as the necessary cost of reducing poverty. They maintain that the wealthiest countries achieved their prosperity through great environmental damage, and the newly developing are being asked to economize to pay for the sins of their predecessors. Others, led by major oil exporting countries such as Iran, Iraq, Nigeria, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Venezuela, are skeptical of measures which will hinder their economic development.

Alternatives before the international community include:

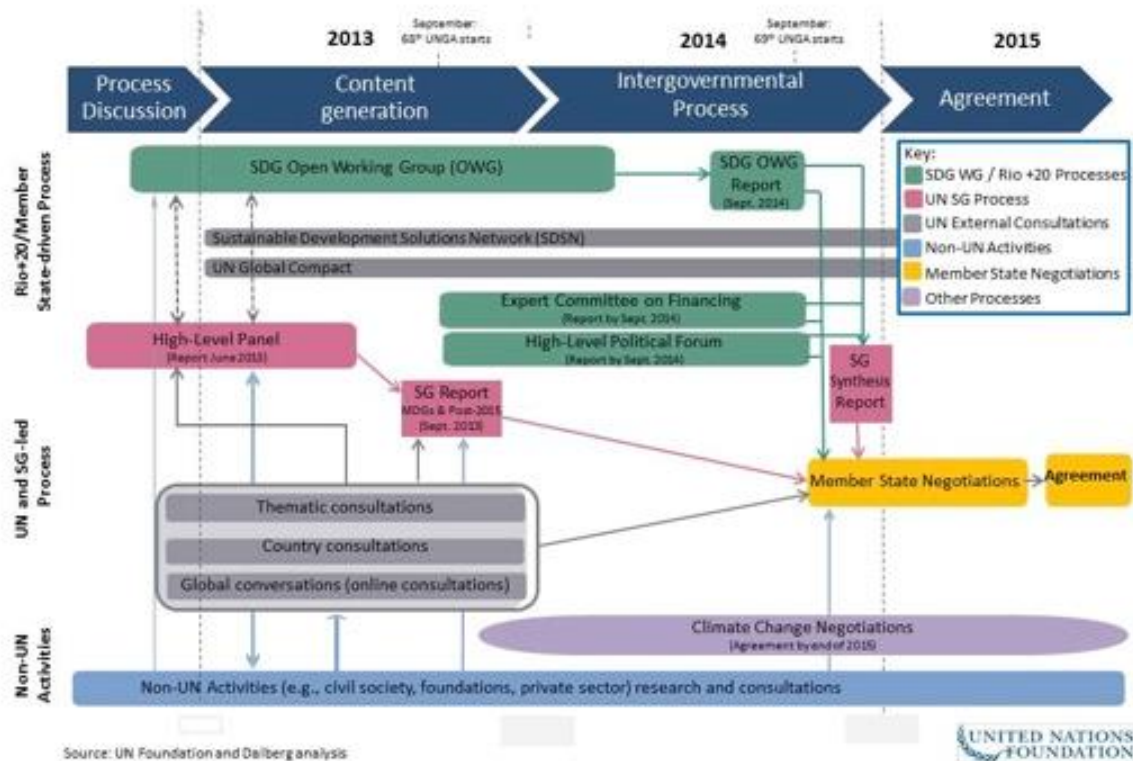
- Specifying particular global or regional SDGs, and the financing and timeframe for their achievement.
- Creation of a program of trade-offs, allowing aid donors and recipient countries to work within international goals to develop their own specific programs and plans. Critics say this will allow government to cherry-pick goals consistent with their current policies and ignore other, more demanding ones.
- Creation of working groups to refine goals and financing for specific SDGs. These proposals would delay action—delays are welcomed by some governments, especially those opposed to aggressive SDG obligations—but produce more systematic plans. Working groups also invites new controversies over which governments are to be represented there, and the role of NGOs. Many governments are opposed to all NGO involvement, while others see NGOs as the fulcrum of the process.

¹ [Carla Kweifio-Okaj](http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2014/aug/06/sustainable-development-goals-un), 'Will these sustainable development goals do the job?', *Guardian*, 6 August 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2014/aug/06/sustainable-development-goals-un> Also see: *Sustainable Development Goals*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sustainable_Development_Goals

² Liz, Ford, 'UN begins talks on SDGs, 'carrying the hopes of millions and millions'', *Guardian*, 24 September 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2014/sep/24/un-begins-talks-sdgs-battle-looms-over-goals>

³ Barbara Unmuessig, 'Radical goals for sustainable development' *Heinrich Böll Foundation*, 5 January 2015. <http://www.eco-business.com/opinion/radical-goals-sustainable-development/>

Figure 2. The SDG process



Further readings on the Sustainable Development Goals:



Goals, goals, goals

The world comes together to set itself some more development targets

20 November 2014 | NEW YORK | **Matthew Bishop**: globalisation editor, *The Economist*

Unless you are a world leader, avoid New York in the last week of September. Manhattan traffic will be gridlocked as the United Nations holds its annual General Assembly, which in 2015 will be the most significant in at least a generation. It will include a big celebration of the progress

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that has been made towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted in 2000—almost certainly a bigger celebration than the uneven results merit. And, with the MDGs expiring at the end of 2015, a new set of goals will be adopted to guide the world until 2030.

They will be called the Sustainable Development Goals but, apart from their name, almost everything about them will be decided through a massive diplomatic free-for-all in the months, days and probably even hours before their unveiling at the General Assembly. The adoption of the MDGs was relatively straightforward in comparison, shepherded through by some UN officials who focused on things that could make a big difference and had a reasonable chance of being implemented. The fight over the Sustainable Development Goals will pit not only rich-country politicians against developing-country ones, but also bring to the battleground multinational companies, philanthropic foundations, NGOs and campaigns by the public. With so much noise, there is a real danger that all the effort will produce nothing of substance.

Eight MDGs were adopted in 2000, ranging from ending extreme hunger and poverty, and reducing child mortality, to forging a partnership between governments and the private sector to promote economic development. The starting-point for the next battle will be a much longer list of proposed goals that has already been trimmed to 17 (including ones on oceans, income inequality and renewable energy), accompanied by some 169 sub-targets.

Some attempts will be made to increase the number of goals (and targets). But the real battle in 2015 will be over whether to have fewer. A group of rich governments, including America and Britain, plus some business leaders and philanthropists such as Bill Gates, would prefer a smaller set of crunchier goals, with an emphasis on building on and completing the work of the MDGs. For them, trying to agree on a goal for, say, income inequality has the potential to be a massive distraction from the practical issues of helping the people now worst off. Developing countries, on the other hand, and in all likelihood the leaders of the UN, will push for a broad package of goals and targets that has the potential to transform the workings of the international economic and political system.



Education, education, education

One key question will be how to define poverty: stick to some sort of income measure of dollars per day, or adopt a more sophisticated yardstick that also takes into account factors such as health and education? The targets will need to be designed to make it hard for governments to pick and choose between them in claiming progress, so that countries can be meaningfully compared. Proposals will be made for new ways to hold to account the rich countries that will have to pay a significant part of the price of achieving the new goals.

The debate about how effective the MDGs have been will intensify as the announcement of the new goals gets nearer. Naysayers will point out that, though progress has been made on, say, bringing down the number of people living in extreme poverty, this has been due largely to the flourishing of capitalism in China rather than anything done by the UN and its agencies or

international aid. But where the MDGs can claim some credit, such as on reducing by millions the number of children under five dying each year, it is clear that mobilising large amounts of money in support of them was crucial.

Money, money, money

The Sustainable Development Goals are more likely to be taken seriously if they come with some big pots of money to help countries pursue them. That will be the focus of an inter-governmental meeting in Addis Ababa in July, where there will be a push to get donor countries to move beyond vague promises to spend 0.7% of GDP on international aid to something focused on specific tasks. New approaches to financing the building of infrastructure in developing countries will be on the table, as will a new Global Fund for Education.

Events in Addis Ababa will play a large part in shaping the mood in New York in September. Similarly, the details of a climate-change deal due to be announced in Paris in December will determine the credibility of any claims that the new goals make about sustainability. All this will be a test of whether fresh life can be injected into the UN system and the notion that countries can work together to tackle the world's biggest problems, or whether the initial promise of the MDGs will be followed by a return to hot air and inaction.

theguardian

UN begins talks on SDGs, ‘carrying the hopes of millions and millions’

Battle looms over the number of development goals expected to replace the MDGs. Cameron joins fray by proposing fewer goals

[Liz Ford](#) in New York, 24 September 2014

Talks that will shape the global agenda on social, economic and environmental development for at least the next 15 years got under way with world leaders in New York on Wednesday.

On the first day of the UN debate, the president of the general assembly, Sam Kutesa, called on member states to work tirelessly over the next 12 months to agree “a truly transformative agenda” in a new set of development goals that will improve the lives of all people. “We carry the expectations of millions and millions of people, but there are many issues and challenges that require our attention and effort in this session,” he said.

The new global targets will replace the millennium development goals (MDGs), which reach their deadline at the end of next year.

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Dilma Rousseff, president of Brazil, told the general assembly ‘we must be ambitious’ when it comes to helping the least developed countries.

Photograph: Mark Garten/UN Photo

Almost 1 billion people still live in poverty, hundreds of thousands of women die each year during pregnancy and childbirth, he said, and while school enrolment has gone up, the quality of teaching is poor in many countries. Kutesa said more effort was needed to empower women, and that he would be convening a high-level debate on this issue in February.

Rising youth unemployment and increasing armed conflict needed to be addressed in the next set of goals. “We call on member states to redouble their efforts,” he said.

In her address to the assembly, the Brazilian president, Dilma Rousseff, said: “It will be crucial for us to identify means of implementation that correspond to the magnitude of the challenges we have committed to overcome. We must be ambitious when it comes to financing, cooperation, national capacity building and technology transfer, especially towards least developed countries.”

A draft set of 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs), [with 169 targets](#), will form the basis of intergovernmental discussions over the next year. The draft, compiled by a [UN-appointed working group](#) that comprised 70 countries, was presented to the general assembly this month.

The proposed 17 goals cover the broad themes of the MDGs – ending poverty and hunger, and improving health, education and gender equality – but also include specific goals to reduce inequality, make cities safe, address climate change and promote peaceful societies.

It is hoped that the goals will encourage a more holistic approach to development at national and international level, and offer a chance for more partnerships and collaboration.

Crucially, the next set of goals will be universal, which means all countries will be required to consider them when crafting their national policies. Officially, the eight MDGs were applicable to all but they have been marketed as anti-poverty goals for poor countries that are funded by wealthy nations.

There have been grumbles that 17 goals are too many, but it is understood that the number is unlikely to be reduced. Instead, the number of targets may be trimmed.

Speaking at a side event at the UN on Wednesday, David Cameron called for not more than 12 goals, preferably 10. “I appreciate the work of the open working group, and how difficult it is to deal with competing demands, but frankly ... I don’t believe they will cut it at 17. There are too many to communicate effectively,” he said. “There’s a real danger they will end up sitting on a bookshelf, gathering dust.”

The UN secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, is due to publish a report in November that will pull in comments from leaders during the generally assembly, plus other consultations that have taken place. The

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report will set the tone for intergovernmental discussions on the SDGs. Two officials will be appointed to create the programme for government debate next year.

The final set of goals are due to be presented at a special session of the general assembly next September. Implementation is expected in 2016.

Amina Mohammed, the UN secretary general's special adviser on post-2015 development planning, said the next 12 months will be the last mile of a long and difficult road to find consensus on what makes the final cut of the SDGs.

"There's lots of pressure. People have fought very hard for these [17 goals] and they don't want them touched, but we don't want to fall into the trap of being too prescriptive. We've got to have conversations that will continue to shape up the goals, get more clarity, more commitments that reflect local reality," she told the Guardian. "It will take a lot of leadership, and courage will be required to take the body blows for this."



Amina Mohammed, special adviser of the UN secretary general on post-2015 development planning, said: 'It will take a lot of leadership, and courage will be required' to achieve the sustainable development goals.

Photograph: Jean-Marc Ferré/UN Photo

Mohammed, who was previously the senior special assistant to the Nigerian president on the MDGs, said it was not about the number of goals or indicators, it was more about ensuring their key elements touched on the reality of life on the ground and could be translated at national level.

"We need to ask what are countries' realities. I go back [home] to Ebola and Boko Haram ... that's my reality," she said. "These goals are only as good as delivery, and delivery is part of a political agenda."

She said it was important that governments didn't cherry-pick some of the goals, but that they were integrated as a whole. To do this, the SDGs needed to resonate with leaders. Their success, she added, would not be judged on the economic growth of a country, but on the difference they have made in people's lives. "We want actionable targets, not those that remain aspirational," Mohammed said.

The UN is also going through a period of soul-searching about whether its institutions are "fit for purpose" in a post-2015 world, and the role its agencies will play in supporting the process.

How to pay for the ambitious post-2015 agenda is a key task ahead. "Funding is crucial for credibility on climate and post-2015 efforts," Ban told the meeting. He said all public, private, domestic and international funding sources needed to be tapped.

A committee of experts on [sustainable development financing](#), set up last year, presented their recommendations last month. The committee said public financing and donor aid will be

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central to support the implementation of the SDGs, but that money generated from the private sector, through tax reforms, and through a crackdown on illicit financial flows and corruption were vital.

The committee report is expected to stimulate debate in the lead-up to a major conference on financing for development in Addis Ababa in July 2015.