

Rethinking Global Development Goals

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The successors to the Millennium Development Goals must take advantage of the power of NGOs, companies, and technologically enabled citizens **BY JOHN W. McARTHUR**

GOVERNMENTS AROUND THE WORLD are grappling to find goals that can set a course for our planet's shared long-term prosperity. They aim to do so before 2015, the expiration date for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that have anchored global antipoverty efforts since 2000. The MDGs—to eradicate poverty, achieve universal primary education, promote gender equality and empowerment, reduce child mortality, improve maternal health, combat killer diseases, ensure environmental sustainability, and develop a global partnership for development—have been endorsed by all 193 UN member states, a huge feat considering how difficult international cooperation can be today.

Diplomats are wary as they face launching a post-2015 generation of goals. Many observers felt despair after the UN's June Rio+20 event produced few concrete outcomes. A more pragmatic reaction would be to consider what system innovations could stretch beyond the walls of government to help achieve new goals.

Let's start by asking what "global goals" mean today, and more important, for 2030. A generation ago they mainly meant officials coordinating government policies and investments around the world. At the time, rich and poor countries were clearly delineated and multilateral institutions helped broker conversations. Today's geopolitical map is far more complicated. There has been a realignment of economic influencers and institutions, and dividing lines between developed and developing nations have blurred.

Stakeholders outside of government are also much more woven into world affairs. Many businesses have a global presence and set their own policy targets. While climate negotiations stall, companies like Microsoft and News Corp have committed to carbon neutrality. NGOs also have proliferated to become more global and businesslike in both advocacy and service delivery. Countless universities have partnerships spanning multiple continents.

Perhaps most important, individual citizens can participate more actively in global society. Mobile phone subscriptions, as just one statistic, have increased from barely 700 million in 2000 to roughly 6 billion today. Soon most of those phones will be on the Internet too. Time and again we have seen how citizens, empowered with new technologies, self-organize to innovate when old structures fail them.

So it won't suffice to cut and paste a 2000-era strategy onto 2015 and beyond. Yes, governments have unique responsibilities in setting and fulfilling public goals, but a new generation of targets needs a broader reach of action and accountability. We need a system of goals



that touches NGOs, companies, academics, and civil society. We don't just need global goals. We need a world of goals.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

The MDGs drew staying power from their combination of ambition, simplicity, measurability, and partnership focus. Their integrated nature helped remove false competition between sectors like health and education. At the same time, the goals have substantive gaps. Analysts are debating new measures for topics like climate change, energy, noncommunicable disease, secondary education, inequality, and governance. These issues will rightly lie at the center of policy debates through to 2015.

Whatever the resolution to those conversations, the MDG experience highlights the need for a proactive approach to translating goals into practice. One part of this is financial. Goals without resources get lost

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in rhetoric. At a time of strained budgets, many global problems require increased investment. The MDGs took flight only in 2002, when US President George W. Bush and other developed country leaders committed to make “concrete efforts towards” the foreign aid target of 0.7 percent of GNP.

A second part of the approach hinges on dissemination. Stakeholder communities get behind goals only once they feel actionable. For example, many developing country civil society leaders initially distrusted the MDGs as top-down targets, established in conference rooms profoundly disconnected from the daily struggles of extreme poverty. It took until 2003-04 for this concern to dissipate, as global voices like Kumi Naidoo, now head of Greenpeace, Salil Shetty, now head of Amnesty International, and Amina Az-Zubair, now a senior UN official, argued that the MDGs are a critical tool for citizens to hold their governments accountable.

Technocrats had their own delays. New health institutions like the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria leveraged the goals to mobilize results, but the international community did not agree to align the MDGs to country-level processes across the board until 2005. Even then, the goals never got deep enough traction in institutions like the World Bank, which often has great influence on poor countries’ budgets and priorities.

For the business and philanthropic communities, it was also probably not until 2005 that the MDGs started to resonate. As media coverage grew, CEOs started to ask, “How can I help?” Some, like Daniel Vasella of Novartis, mobilized their company’s pharmaceutical technologies. Others, like Ray Chambers, the retired Wall Street investor, committed to broad coordination efforts around specific problems like malaria. By January 2008 the goals had gained enough prominence to be the centerpiece of a star-studded session at Davos. Then Bill Gates came out strongly as an MDG champion. In a September 2008 speech to the UN General Assembly, he described the goals as “the best idea for focusing the world on fighting global poverty that [he has] ever seen.”

On university campuses, the experience has been mixed. Visionary academics like Jeffrey Sachs and Paul Farmer have inspired new generations of students and citizens from the earliest MDG days. The health research community has energetically tackled the MDGs, with *The Lancet* hosting its global academic debates. As of June 2012, a search in that journal under “Millennium Development Goals” turned up nearly 1,000 articles since March 2002. Contrast this with the economics community, where the standard-bearing *American Economic Review* has published only seven articles referencing the MDGs. The *Journal of Development Economics*, the discipline’s leading specialty journal, had its first MDG mention in 2007, and in only 12 other articles since.

A WORLD OF GOALS

The new goals must foster a broad sense of accessibility and accountability. If they are seen as applying only to national governments, then too many leaders will feel like bystanders. If they are seen as too broad to chew on, then no one will take a bite. Success will hinge on a common global vision. But they will need to invoke common local implications, clear answers to the questions “What do I need to do?” and “To whom am I responsible?” These ques-

tions need answers from Day One. The world can’t afford to wait five or eight years after 2015 for people to click with the ideas. So the coming three years offer an opportunity for ambitious creativity on how those outside government can best proceed.

Governments can start the process by quickly locking in global agreements on the extreme poverty agenda. The MDGs aimed to cut extreme poverty by half, so the next step is to get it to zero by, say, 2030, with corresponding universal minimum standards for health, education, infrastructure, and so forth. At the same time, governments should continue to negotiate agreements on the priority challenges for the environment, social equity, and economic growth. A decentralized goal-setting process could then tap the ingenuity of all stakeholders in alignment with the global vision.

Consider a child survival goal consistent with zero extreme poverty. The technical target might be 30 child deaths per 1,000 live births, roughly today’s level in upper-middle-income countries. It would apply to every corner of the globe, not just to countries, but also to states, provinces, districts, cities, and communities. Indeed, each level of government could be responsible for setting and tracking its targets in transparent collaboration with local partners.

The next step would be to encourage industries, NGOs, academics, and citizens to establish their own goals, with check-in years at 2020, 2025, and 2030. Goals would be voluntary, but would have the traction that comes with public commitments and scrutiny. Targets would draw from the same factors that have made the MDGs successful: ambition, simplicity, measurability, and a partnership focus.

At global and local levels, the pharmaceutical industry could set time-bound targets for discovery and availability of low-cost drugs. The food industry could set its own targets for tackling the undernutrition that contributes to millions of child deaths each year. NGO peers could set common targets for their own service delivery and outreach. Academic communities could identify targets for research and discovery. Importantly, competitors could set norms together, so that none feels an undue burden. Each stakeholder group would invite others’ review in setting and tracking targets.

Citizen goals would follow naturally, with individuals and communities making their own public pledges, crowdsourcing data reports, and providing direct input on the content of broader goals. A simple global vote on the goals’ overarching name would surely also produce something catchier than “MDGs.”

Negotiations are now under way to craft a road map for the next three years. There will be a major UN event in September 2013, the final MDG checkpoint before the 2015 deadline. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has launched a high-level panel to make recommendations in advance. The General Assembly has announced its own 30-member expert group. If all goes well, the 2013 event will set the contours for a post-2015 vision. If the pieces aren’t yet in place, then the next major event will likely be at the United Nations in the fall of 2015.

In the meantime, stakeholders outside government have a huge opportunity to lead by example through their own ambitiously aligned goals. The ideas here offer a simple first proposal. With crowdsourcing, countless minds can make them better. Such modern forms of collaboration can help the traditions of global goal setting catch up to the era in which we now live. ■