**Sustainable Development Goals: Are They Overambitious?**

**Introduction: The Millennium Development Goals, a good start.**
The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the United Nation’s latest strategy to fight the health, environmental, and social issues that currently afflict the world. The SDGs build on their predecessor – The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs marked the beginning in a new era of global responsibility for global health. Following the United Nations Millennium Declaration in 2000,[1, 2] eight goals were put forward to address some of the biggest issues that face human health in the new millennium;[2-4]

- Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- Achieve universal primary education
- Promote gender equality and empower women
- Reduce child mortality
- Improve maternal health
- Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- Ensure environmental sustainability
- Develop a global partnership for development

In order to assess the feasibility of the new sustainable development goals, it seems logical to assess the outcomes of their precursors. The MDGs represent a summary of the main issues identified at various conferences and summits from the previous decades. At the beginning of a new millennium, where mankind had achieved so much already, 8 targets seemed possible to accomplish in only 15 years.

**So, why haven’t we solved all of the world’s problems by 2015?**
The success of the MDGs has been highly variable[5] across goals, regions and nations: some countries have achieved many of the eight goals, others very few [2, 6, 7]. The key areas where there has been ‘insufficient progress’ made have been identified as; MDG 2-provision of universal primary education, MDG 4-reduction in child mortality, and MDG 5-reduction in maternal mortality[7, 8]. In summary, the MDGs have led to a substantial decrease in extreme poverty and hunger, in the deaths of young children and women in pregnancy/child birth, and the incidence of AIDS[9, 10]. Whilst, this is admirable, there is still much work to be done.

As with all new and innovative ideas, it seemed there were some flaws with the MDGs. Beginning with formulation, there were some key objectives of the Millennium Declaration (2000) that were not addressed in the MDGs, for example peace and disarmament. Therefore, it has been argued that the goals did not include all of the key issues identified at that time. In terms of the goals themselves, there was widespread criticism that key issues had been ignored, the largest of which being climate change[1]. Other critics suggested there were gaps between areas of global development that the goals did cover, and the goals themselves were too narrow-minded. For example, only primary education was identified as a target. Whilst we can all agree basic education is an important building block for the
development of an educated and functional society, it ignores the provision of education necessary for the skilled adults that society demands; farmers, plumbers, engineers, doctors, mechanics etc. So whilst improving primary education is a noble, and measureable effort, it may not by itself achieve the aim of producing a sufficiently skilled population required for the development of nations and mankind. As described, the MDGs were the first of their kind, and endorsed by 189 governments\(^1\), an unprecedented agreement on the call for more action on global issues. It also encouraged a better attitude of monitoring and the development of aid projects. Although the MDGs cannot be described as a resounding success, they were far from a complete failure.

The UN’s new targets: Sustainable Development Goals
In 2012, world leaders met at the Rio+20 conference to discuss sustainable development, exactly 20 years after the Earth Summit and Agenda 21\(^1\)\(^1\)\(^1\). Following this meeting, work began on formulating the next set of global targets. In stark contrast to the MDGs, which were said the have been conceived around a table and based on what the UN had already been doing, the consultation process for the production of the SDGs was a big undertaking. All 193 member states had input into the development of these goals\(^9\). People from over 100 countries, all socioeconomic positions, were asked what they wanted these goals to address. Never before have the people of the world had such a strong voice when it comes to influencing policy that affects everyone.

In August 2015, the UN launched the Agenda for Global Action, which detailed 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their targets\(^9\)\(^,\)\(^12\). The agenda claims to “free the human race from the tyranny and poverty and [will] heal and secure our planet for present and future generations\(^9\)\(^,\)\(^13\)\(^,\)\(^14\)”. One journal author had this to say on the matter “The cynics are wrong. Like the MDGs, the SDGs can provoke a new global awareness of needs and possibilities on a global scale”\(^10\). Considering the enormity of the task at hand, bold claims have been made regarding the possible success of these new goals. The SDGs are said to have built upon the foundations that the MDGs laid-covering similar issues, but with greater depth. Some of the less well-accomplished MDGs feature again in the SDGs, for example child and maternal health\(^15\)\(^,\).

Aside from the difference in numbers (17 SDGs vs 8 MDGs, 169 targets for SDGs vs 21 for MDGs)\(^9\)\(^,\)\(^16\) there are other key differences between the two sets of goals. The SDGs cover a broader area of global development, to include areas such as environmental concerns, peace, economic growth\(^9\). At first glance, it seems surprising that only one goal concerns health, compared with 3 of the previous MDGs\(^17\)\(^,\)\(^18\). However, health has not been left out of the new agenda as other goals are intricately linked to health: poverty, sanitation etc. The SDGs are being widely praised for better integration of topics\(^19\). WHO officials seem generally satisfied with the SDG agenda, Ties Boerma director of WHO’s Department of Health Statistics and Information Systems “... was to see that the SDGs addressed the unfinished MDG agenda head on, and they do”.\(^9\)
Realistic or Overambitious?

So, we have a new set of 17 goals, and 169 targets, and a lot of UN enthusiasm, will this lead to success? Not according to a recent article published in the Lancet: “The SDGs are fairy tales, dressed in the bureaucratese of intergovernmental narcissism, adorned with the robes of multilateral paralysis, and poisoned by the acid of nation-state failure”\(^{[20]}\). The author of this article argues that human factors (such as wellbeing, capability, intergenerational equality, externalities, resilience) play a greater part in sustainable development than some of the environmental aspects that have received new attention in the SDGs\(^{[20]}\). It is argued that unless these factors are addressed, we have not truly embraced the full meaning of sustainability. The pessimism that has been expressed at the introduction of the SDGs is understandable—after all, how can a new set of goals combat the powerful forces of politics and economy where other goal-driven measures have failed?

Conclusion

At the time of writing, there are less than twelve hours until 2016 begins, and the SDGs take over as the new goals for global development for the next fifteen years \(^{[21]}\). It seems we have adapted and learnt from where the MDGs fell short. The SDGs cover a broader horizon of global issues and provide more comprehensive and integrated targets to achieve these goals. Realistically, it’s likely that the SDGs are over ambitious, and not every target will be accomplished by the deadline in 2030.

The MDGs were criticized for being too simple and narrow-focused, but conversely the SDGs have been criticized for being too complex to realistically achieve. Like the classic story of Goldilocks, it seems we are still looking for global development goals that are ‘just right’.

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References:
