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Does the world really need development goals?

JAMES KYNGE

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By Sanjay G. Reddy and Ingrid Kvangraven, The New School for Social Research

Should we really have new global development goals? The push for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – meant to guide the process of global development from 2015 to 2030 and expected to be adopted by governments at the UN in September – assumes the answer is yes.

Activists, lobbyists and government officials scrambled during the last two years to make sure that their respective interests were reflected in the new agenda and that has contributed to its bewildering complexity (17 goals, 169 proposed targets and 304 proposed indicators). Given that the goals were all but sure to be adopted, it is hardly a surprise that an imperfect political process governed their creation.

However, why adopt goals at all? Any systematic effort to answer this elementary conceptual question is disturbingly absent.

Not only has this basic question has not been answered. What is most puzzling is that it has hardly been asked, not only in regard to the incoming goals but also to the previous ones. The public has instead been treated to a refrain from the global development bureaucracy that the outgoing Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were a huge success, and therefore we must proceed with a new round.

Ban Ki-Moon, the United Nations' Secretary General, recently claimed that the "...MDGs helped to lift more than one billion people out of extreme poverty".

Unfortunately, there is little justification for this statement. Whether the MDGs helped to advance development should ultimately be assessed in light of what would have happened without them. However, UN statistician Howard Friedman finds no statistically significant accelerations of global progress in the MDG indicators after the goals were introduced in 2000, except for on debt relief.

Although poverty has fallen since 2000 according to the most widely used estimates, the global rate of poverty reduction has not increased. Similarly with other indicators. To argue that the goals contributed to poverty reduction, their defenders have to point to specific regions such as Sub-

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Saharan Africa — but here, other factors such as robust economic growth due in large part to the global commodities boom after 2000 probably played a much more important causal role.

Why then the presumption that the MDGs were a success and that successor goals must be adopted? There are several possible reasons for this drumbeat. One is the bureaucratic propensity to self-justification. Another is that the language of accountability through quantifiable targets, initially pushed by aid donors, has gained widespread currency, perhaps because insiders understand how little it means in practice: given the number and complexity of the causes for observed outcomes, responsibility for shortfalls is nearly impossible to assign.

What are the good reasons to adopt goals of any kind? We may imagine three, all of which might be present in global development—although this must be argued rather than assumed. First, goals can have an epistemic role: they provide a framework for organizing information by fixing a reference point in relation to which achievements and shortfalls can be defined and compared.

Second, goals can play a motivational role: a goal viewed as desirable may spur individual and collective efforts either because of the psychology of intrinsic motivation or because they become the object of external incentives. Third, goals can provide a focal point around which actors coordinate their actions, which in the case of interdependencies between different actors (for instance, aid donors) may lead to better outcomes than otherwise.

If global development goals create a benefit by playing these roles, this has to be compared with their cost: for instance, by leading to people and institutions focusing relentlessly on goal monitoring and related tasks or otherwise crowding out more open-ended or process-centered understandings of what development is about and how it is to be achieved.

Aside from questions of justification, there are also questions of specification. In any goal-setting exercise, there must be consistency between end-goals and intermediate goals as well as between means and ends. For example, if your end-goal were to be able to do one hundred push-ups by the beginning of November, it would very likely be insufficiently ambitious to set an intermediate goal of being able to do only ten pushups by the middle of October.

Are the targets identified in the global goals merely intermediate goals, and if so toward what? Whether they are too ambitious or insufficiently so must be judged in light of considerations both of realism and of ultimate goals. Are you doing push ups to improve your health, to prepare for a competition, to test oneself, or to win friends? Knowing this will help evaluate whether the goals and targets that you are setting make sense. There may be better ways to gain friends than to do push ups, for instance.

The question of what development goals to adopt is therefore inseparable, both in terms of instrumentality and values, from the question of what kind of world we ultimately wish to create. In practice, a paradox of specification must be faced: On the one hand, highly abstract but

agreeable goals such as to ‘improve one’s health’ may lack sufficient directive implication.

In contrast, highly specific goals such as to ‘eat spinach at least twice a week’ may be too directive, offering insufficient room for variation across situations, and paying too little heed to the way in which the attainment of general aims results progressively and in difficult-to-anticipate ways from a sequence of specific steps that build on one another.

Focusing on eliminating specific diseases without strengthening health systems, for example, can result in failure to achieve even the desired health goals. (The Ebola crisis provides a case in point of the toll of such neglect). Development strategy concerns how efforts of different kinds, which have effects on different time scales, should play a role in achieving the larger goals, in the presence of uncertainty. This question is best dealt with through democratic decision making, drawing on causal experience and practical judgment and making reference to shared values.

Why do we not make everything we do the subject of goal setting? Fetishizing goals can get in the way of living well, especially if our goals fail to encompass or anticipate important matters. For instance, as important as measurement is, the notion that if something cannot be counted, then it does not count, can also have serious costs. A regime of child-raising focused exclusively on measurable indicators of the quality would give insufficient attention to the important idea that raising children well requires treating them with love and respect.

The inattention to procedural values would very likely also give rise to undesirable outcomes. In the collective context, the value of democratic decision-making implies leaving goals and plans open to revision and is thus in tension with a target-centric perspective. Such openness to revision is however also needed to produce desirable outcomes, both because the world itself and our knowledge of it change over time and because to implement policies effectively requires the ongoing public perception of their legitimacy.

If the goals are meant as a mere rhetorical frame, then the adverse effects of a goal-centered concept of development, or of a poor specific choice of goals, can be safely ignored, and the whole SDG effort may be viewed as bombast. If, rather, the goals are intended to have a substantive impact, they must be better justified.

Global goals should be adopted only if we think that having goals does not undermine important procedural values, and if goals will have epistemic, motivational or coordination roles that can lead to improvements in people’s lives. It is hard to imagine that the lengthy list of ‘targets’ and ‘indicators’ can satisfy these criteria. The higher-level goals, however, have some motivational force and may each individually possess a rationale. Taken together, they provide something closer to a holistic vision.

A dual perspective is needed, in which a vision of a better world accompanies and makes sense of specific goals, providing flexibility for differing emphases and priorities across and within them.

This dual perspective is attractive for both empirical and evaluative reasons, even if it means a less directive approach to development.

If there must be development goals — which is far from obvious — then global quantitative targets should be de-emphasized or in some cases done away with altogether. Specific targets such as the reduction or elimination of diseases or of poverty may retain their attractiveness but others will not.

Global goals should be advanced through national plans that might not involve quantitative targets but that would specify strategies. Such national approaches should be the subject of discussion and review by the public within and outside countries, drawing on relevant expertise to improve their conception, execution and coordination. Such an approach would open more room for experimentation with innovative development strategies, and create a richer global public conversation on what development is, whom it should serve, how and why.

Sanjay G. Reddy is associate professor, department of economics at the The New School for Social Research, New York. Ingrid Kvangraven is a PhD student at the The New School for Social Research, New York.

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