SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The MDGs, which expire in 2015 to pave way for the SDGs, set 21 targets in eight areas, including gender equality and child and maternal health. Picture: File

For its next development agenda, UN needs a fix on achievable goals

If you could come up with goals for the world to aspire to over the next 15 years, what would they be? What should we focus on?

The United Nations is currently conducting an online survey, asking people from around the world what matters most to them. Over 2.5 million people have responded, with everything from better transport and roads, to affordable and nutritious food, under consideration. So far, the top global priority is better education, followed by better healthcare and an honest and responsive government, with reliable energy and climate change at the bottom. But to make a more considered priority list, we need much more information on what solutions exist, their costs and their likelihood of success to make a better prioritisation.

This survey is part of a larger effort by the UN to find a successor scheme for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which are set to expire in 2015. The MDGs set 21 mostly sharp and achievable targets in eight areas, including poverty and hunger, gender equality, education, and child and maternal health.

These goals have been hugely successful, not only in driv-

COMMENTARY

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ing more development funding but also in making the world a better place. For instance, the MDGs aimed to halve the proportion of people hungry counting from 1990. And the progress has been remarkable. In 1990, almost 24 per cent of all people in the developing world were starving. In 2012, "only" 14.5 per cent were starving, and if current trends continue, the world will reach 12.2 per cent in 2015, just shy of the halving at 11.9 per cent.

MDG successor scheme

Likewise, we promised to cut by half the proportion of the poor. In 1990, 43 per cent of the developing world lived below a dollar a day. In 2010, the proportion had already been more than halved at 20.6 per cent — on current trends the proportion will drop below 15 per cent by 2015, showing spectacular progress.

With the MDGs expiring next year, the UN is now working to replace the MDGs with a successor scheme, called Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). But that's easier said than done. One tracker shows a list of more than 1,400 proposed targets. Clearly we need priorities.

The SDGs will determine a large part of the $2.5 trillion development aid the world will spend until 2030. In order to spend the money most effectively and help as many people as possible, negotiators now need to zero in on the targets that promise the biggest benefit for the investment.

My think-tank, the Copenhagen Consensus, has engaged in a project to determine which targets will do the most good per dollar spent. We have commissioned 57 teams of renowned economists to estimate costs and benefits within 19 major

areas, comprising about 50 targets, throughout the rest of this year. Estimating the benefits will take account not just of economic benefits but also the health, social and environmental benefits that may be accrued from these targets. The recommendations will be peer-reviewed. At the same time, UN agencies, NGOs and businesses will comment on the findings. Three Nobel Laureates will then evaluate the economic evidence to classify all targets into categories ranging from phenomenal, good, and fair to poor. Phenomenal targets will be colour coded dark green, fair targets yellow, and poor targets red. Backed by thousands of pages of peer reviewed economic research, such a simple colour scheme will hopefully help the world's busy decision makers focus on picking the most effective targets.

But with the negotiations already begun, we asked our economists to prepare a preliminary assessment on about 200 of the proposed targets.

They found that reducing malaria and tuberculosis, for example, is a phenomenal target. Its costs are small because solutions are simple, cheap and well-documented. Its benefits are large, not only because it

avoids death and prolonged, agonising sickness, but also improves societal productivity and initiates a virtuous circle.

Similarly, we should focus on at least halving malnutrition, because there is robust evidence that proper nutrition for young children leads to a lifetime of large benefits — better brain development, improved academic performance, and ultimately higher productivity as adults. For every dollar spent, future generations will receive almost $60 in benefits.

But at what point do goals simply become aspirations? While many ambitious goals are commendable, they may be unrealistic in practice — and could hinder instead of advance progress. For example, setting an absolute goal of ending global malnutrition, warn the economists, may sound alluring, but is implausibly optimistic and inefficient. We cannot achieve it, and even if we could, the resources to help the last hungry person would be better spent elsewhere.

Change of focus

At the other end of the scale, some proposed targets are ineffective. The doubling of the renewable energy share by 2030, for example, sounds great in theory but practically is an expensive way to cut just a little carbon dioxide. Instead, the focus should be on providing more energy to poor people, a proven way of inclusive growth and poverty alleviation. And in order to reduce carbon emissions, removing fossil fuel subsidies in Third World countries promises much higher benefits. Reducing these subsidies in countries where fuel is sometimes sold for a few cents per litre would stop wasting resources, send the right price signals, and reduce the strain on government budgets, while also cutting emissions.

Labelling development targets as great, good, fair and poor is not rocket science, but surprisingly, it has never been done systematically before.

Over the coming months, I look forward to sharing the economists' thinking over 19 important areas and help kickstart the conversation on our goals for 2030. Of course, the ultimate decision for the 2030 targets is a political one. No doubt, economics is not the only measure of what global society should ultimately choose as its development priorities, but costs and benefits do play an important role. If well-documented economic arguments can help swap a few poor targets for a few phenomenal ones, leveraging trillions of dollars in development aid in the right direction, could make this the best thing any of us get to do this decade.

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