

# Many UN development goals still far off target, experts say

*As UN draws up next targets ahead of Millennium Development Goals deadline, concerns mount that they are too vague*

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Many of the United Nation's poverty eradication goals are still far off their targets, with only about a year from their deadline, and some experts are concerned that the next targets being developed are too vague and unwieldy, falling into the same traps.

[The Millennium Development Goals](#), which every U.N. member state pledged to work to meet 14 years ago, were hailed as being among the world body's greatest successes. For the first time, they gave poorer nations tangible benchmarks for economic and social development and gave more developed countries a framework they could use to coordinate international aid and policy.

While there's wide agreement that the goals were successful in many areas, critics say some targets were overly broad and focused too heavily on outcomes instead of addressing the root causes of poverty and its associated problems.

The goal to halve world hunger, for example, could more easily be achieved by giving malnourished people enough rice to last them until 2015 than it could by fundamentally changing the underlying causes of their hunger, which range from the effects of globalization to political corruption to global warming.

"The way they selected the indicators drove a focus on basic needs and narrowly defined outcomes instead of looking at development as a process that requires political and social change," said Alicia Yamin, policy director for the FXB Center for Health and Human Rights

at Harvard University.

Many are hoping the crafters of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) — targets for the next 15 years — don't make the same mistakes.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were ambitious: They sought to cut in half world hunger; bring primary education to all; promote gender equality; reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; reduce the incidence of HIV/AIDs, malaria and other diseases; promote environmental sustainability; and help develop better working relationships between governments and NGOs.

By some measures, the goals were a resounding success. The goal of cutting in half the number of people living on \$1.25 or less a day was achieved five years early. Primary school enrollment in developing nations grew from 83 to 90 percent from 2000 to 2011.

The child mortality rate has also fallen considerably, more women are working, and new HIV and malaria infections are plummeting.

But some development targets are going in reverse.

Experts consider the promotion of gender equality one of the most problematic goals. It focuses on gender parity only in schooling and even with that narrow scope has failed to meet its goal, with women still facing disadvantages at higher levels of education. In sub-Saharan Africa, where [the disparity is most extreme](#), the gap has actually widened. Only 61 women for every 100 men attended higher education institutions in 2011, compared with 66 in 2000.

But perhaps the most widely criticized goal is the one meant to promote environmental sustainability. The goal contains few measurable targets, using language like “integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies” and “reduce biodiversity loss.” While the goal doesn't give direction on how to reduce biodiversity loss, the U.N.'s progress report on the goal acknowledges that carbon emissions, one of the main causes of biodiversity loss, have increased by nearly 50 percent globally since 1990.

“On the environment side, we still don’t have a good approach to tackling the problem globally,” said John McArthur, an economist at the Brookings Institution and a senior fellow at the United Nations Foundation. “Tackling climate gets into the way economies are organized. And issues that affect economic policy are harder to organize around.”

The U.N. office on sustainable development did not return a request for comment.

“I think there’s a global realization that we need a global effort [on climate],” said John W. Ashe, Antigua and Barbuda’s ambassador to the U.N. But even with that recognition and a climate conference scheduled a little over a year from now, “no one can say whether there will be an agreement on how to solve the problem and whether that agreement will be adequate.”

Yamin and others have also argued that the goals leave out the poor living in developed nations. Bringing incomes above \$1.25 a day may help people in largely undeveloped countries, but it ignores the growing number of people living in middle- and high-income countries like India, China and the United States who can't afford food. Someone making a little more than \$1.25 a day in the U.S., Yamin pointed out, would still not be able to afford enough food.

The SDGs are supposed to address those issues. For example, the goal of addressing hunger encourages not only an end to hunger but also the support of sustainable agriculture in places where hunger is a pressing issue. And in addition to ending extreme poverty, that goal now calls on nations to end poverty in their own countries as defined by their national poverty lines.

But now there’s concern that incorporating all the critiques of the MDGs into the SDGs has made them unwieldy. The current draft of the SDGs has 17 goals and 169 targets, subsets within each goal, in contrast to the current eight goals and 22 targets.

“One of the great things about the MDGs was the messaging power. You could name all the goals,” said Casey Dunning, a senior policy analyst at the Center for Global Development, a think tank in Washington, D.C. “With 17 goals, that messaging power is diminished. It will be impossible for a country to take a list of 169 targets and even know where to start.”

Dunning is supportive of the differences between the MDGs and the SDGs, but she added, “There is a way to go to pare down the agenda.”

Ashe, however, said that the millennium goals must serve as a basis for the new goals. “It would be foolhardy to simply discard the Millennium Development Goals,” Ashe, the outgoing president of the U.N. General Assembly, said. “We have to build on them, not discard them.”

Adding to concerns about the targets is the fact that in a postrecession world, the amount of aid given to many of the world’s poorest countries is [falling](#). Aid to Africa dropped by 5.6 percent last year and, according to forecasts, could decrease even more this year and the next.

Experts say that without a renewed commitment to aid, achieving the SDGs will be much harder.

McArthur pointed to the current Ebola crisis as an good example of what happens when too little aid is provided. If developed countries had acted sooner, providing money, health workers and other needed resources, [the crisis might have been nipped in the bud](#) earlier this summer, he said.

“Now solving the Ebola crisis is going to cost billions of dollars instead of several million dollars,” he said. “That’s the price of inaction.”