Global Development’s Winning Goals

NEW YORK – The world’s governments meet at a special session of the United Nations General Assembly on September 25 to discuss how to accelerate progress on the Millennium Development Goals, and also to agree on a timetable for a new set of Sustainable Development Goals. The MDGs, adopted in 2000, will conclude in 2015, to be followed by the SDGs, most likely for the 2015-2030 period.

The MDGs focus on ending extreme poverty, hunger, and preventable disease. They have been the most important global development goals in the UN’s history. The SDGs will continue the fight against extreme poverty, but also add the challenges of ensuring more equitable economic growth and environmental sustainability, especially the key goal of curbing the
dangers of human-induced climate change.

Setting international development goals has made a huge difference in people’s lives, particularly in the poorest places on the planet. Sub-Saharan Africa has benefited enormously from the MDGs, and we can learn from that success in designing the SDGs.

To see the MDGs’ importance for Sub-Saharan Africa, one need only compare the decade before their adoption with the decade after. In the ten years before the MDGs, economic growth in the region was slow, the poverty rate was high (and rising), and there was an increasingly heavy disease burden, including HIV/AIDS and malaria.

The adoption of the MDGs focused increased attention by African governments, non-governmental organizations, UN agencies, international donors, foundations, and activists on the urgency of combating poverty, hunger, and disease. The MDGs also cast a global spotlight on the crippling debt burdens faced by many of Africa’s poorest countries, leading to a process of debt cancelation led by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

From 2000 to 2010, Sub-Saharan Africa’s poverty rate (as measured by the share of those living on less than $1.25/day) fell to 48.5%, after having risen from 56.5% to 58% in the 1990-1999 period, while overall annual economic growth, which averaged 2.3% from 1990 to
2000, more than doubled, to 5.7% during the 2000-2010 period.

There were significant improvements in disease control as well. From 1990 to the peak year, around 2004, annual malaria deaths rose from roughly 800,000 to 1.6 million. After that point, upon the MDGs-inspired mass distribution of anti-malaria bed nets, malaria deaths began to decline, to around 1.1 million per year in 2010, and perhaps lower now.

Likewise, as of 2000, there were still no official donor-supported programs to enable poor Africans to receive antiretroviral treatment for AIDS. Thanks in large part to the agenda-setting power of the MDGs, donor programs to fight AIDS began to be implemented, and more than six million Africans now receive antiretroviral treatment supported by official donor programs.

As Special Adviser to the UN Secretary-General on the MDGs since 2001 (to Kofi Annan until 2006, and to Ban Ki-moon since 2007), I have seen how seriously many African governments take the targets, using them to set priorities, catalyze stakeholders, increase public awareness and motivation, and hold ministries accountable. Over time, the UN and the high-income countries’ donor agencies increasingly used the MDGs to help organize their own work in Africa as well. While the MDGs are not the only factor underpinning the
improvements since 2000, they have played a huge role.

Of course, much remains to be done to maximize progress on achieving the targets set by the MDGs. Most important, significant gains in health could be attained with adequate financial resources. Donor countries should provide ample replenishment funding later this year to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB, and Malaria, which would ensure this vital agency’s continued success.

When UN member states turn to the next set of global development goals, they should learn from the MDGs. First, keeping the list of SDGs relatively short – no more than ten – will make them easy to remember, which will help in mobilizing the public.

Second, all governments, rich and poor, should be accountable for meeting the SDGs as implementers. The MDGs applied mainly to poor countries as implementers and to rich countries as donors. The SDGs should apply to all countries as implementers (and also to rich countries as donors). Indeed, when it comes to problems like climate change, which will be at the core of the new SDGs, rich countries have more work ahead of them than poor countries do.

Third, the SDGs should build on the MDGs. The MDGs helped to cut global extreme poverty by more than half. The SDGs should take on the challenge of ending
extreme poverty for good. The World Bank, to its credit, has already adopted the goal of ending extreme poverty by 2030. UN member states should do the same.

Finally, the SDGs should mobilize expert groups around the key challenges of sustainable development. When the MDGs first appeared, the relevant specialists began to organize themselves to give advice on achieving them. The UN Millennium Project synthesized the counsel of roughly 250 global experts on crucial development issues. The same process of expert advice and problem solving is urgently needed on issues such as low-carbon energy, sustainable agriculture, resilient cities, and universal health coverage, all of which are likely to feature in the SDGs.

Fifty years ago, US President John F. Kennedy declared that, “By defining our goal more clearly, by making it seem more manageable and less remote, we can help all people to see it, to draw hope from it, and to move irresistibly towards it.” The MDGs have helped to play that role in the fight against poverty. The SDGs can do the same for the complex challenge of achieving sustainable development.

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