

The world's new sustainable development goals

September 22 2015, by John Thwaites



Good governance is a foundation for sustainable development under the new goals. Credit: Lars Plougmann/Flickr, CC BY-SA

On September 25 world leaders will meet in New York to formalise the new Sustainable Development Goals. These 17 goals will guide efforts to reduce poverty and increase well-being, without destroying the Earth. The Conversation is looking at how we got here, and how far we have to go.

Later this week, world leaders will gather at the United Nations in New

York and adopt a set of [Sustainable Development Goals](#) to guide global development. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull won't be there, but Foreign Minister Julie Bishop will sign Australia up to an ambitious set of goals and targets that will apply to all countries from January 1 next year until 2030.

After a long negotiation process, the 193 member states of the United Nations have agreed to [17 goals](#) and 169 targets that seek to eradicate [extreme poverty](#) and hunger, promote economic growth and prosperity, improve health and education and protect the planet.

If that sounds like a lot of targets, it is, because the goals represent a very big agenda and the culmination of extensive input from countries, non-government organisations, business and millions of ordinary citizens around the world. All countries including Australia are expected to use the goals in framing their agendas and policies.

What are they?

The Sustainable Development Goals aim to encourage countries and the private sector to focus simultaneously on the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic prosperity, social inclusion and [environmental sustainability](#). Several countries, including Australia, argued during the negotiating process that peace and good governance are pre-conditions for sustainable development.

So there is also a goal (number 16) to "promote peaceful and inclusive societies", and "build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions".

Within each of the goals there are targets such as reducing by at least half the number of people living in poverty according to national definitions (goal 1.2) and reducing premature mortality from non-communicable diseases like diabetes by one-third by 2030 (goal 3.4).

Under the clean energy goal there is a target to double the rate of improvement in energy efficiency by 2030, and a specific goal to make cities more sustainable with targets to increase affordable housing and access to sustainable transport (goal 11)

Building on the Millennium Development Goals

The Sustainable Development Goals build on the [Millennium Development Goals](#) (or MDGs), which were agreed by governments in 2000 and expire this year. The MDGs focused on reducing poverty and hunger and improving health and education in developing countries.

The MDGs did not specifically address economic development or infrastructure and were not seen as relevant to developed countries. While one of the MDGs (goal 7) sought to ensure environmental sustainability, most of the focus under this goal has been on the target to halve the proportion of the population without safe drinking water or sanitation.

In some respects the MDGs have been phenomenally successful. They have helped focus the efforts of governments, aid organisations and philanthropists on reducing poverty and improving health and education in developing countries. The extreme poverty rate in developing countries [has plummeted](#) from 47% in 1990 to 14% in 2015.

Across the world, tremendous progress has been made in enrolling children in primary school, and even in Sub-Saharan Africa, [primary school enrolment](#) increased from 60% in 2000 to 80% in 2015. Real successes have been achieved in the fight against HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis and there has been substantial progress in reducing child and maternal mortality.

However the MDGs have been criticised as being too narrow and failing

to link together the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental. Many of the challenges the world faces require a global effort from all countries, not just developing countries.

How far have we got to go?

Despite the great advances in poverty alleviation and development, there are still around 800 million people living in extreme poverty or suffering from hunger. In some areas the world has gone backwards. In most countries relative inequality has increased.

Climate change, deforestation and environmental degradation now threaten to undermine future well-being and the development gains that have been achieved. Global greenhouse gases are now more than 50% higher than in 1990 and deforestation, desertification and collapsing fisheries threaten the livelihoods of some of the world's most vulnerable people.

The fact that all the world's [countries](#) have been able to agree on a set of goals and targets for sustainable development – a sort of "to do list" for a better world is important in itself. As the [Declaration](#) accompanying the goals states: "Never before have world leaders pledged common action and endeavour across such a broad and universal policy agenda".

The goals are a tremendous opportunity to spur government, civil society, academic and business action, and set benchmarks against which they will be held accountable. Hopefully the [goals](#) will also increase public awareness of the need for sustainable development and mobilise networks of expertise to focus on finding solutions to the world's key [sustainable development](#) challenges.

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