

From MDGs to SDGs: What are the Sustainable Development Goals?

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The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the centerpiece of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, were adopted by the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit in September 2015. This briefing sheet explains the formation of the SDGs and examines factors that can contribute to or limit their success.

Key messages

- The 17 SDGs carry on the work begun by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which galvanized a global campaign from 2000-2015 to end poverty in its various dimensions. Yet while the MDGs only applied to developing countries, the SDGs will apply universally to all UN member states, and are considerably more comprehensive and ambitious than the MDGs.
- In order for the SDGs to be fully successful, urban areas and their local governments – where the majority of implementation and monitoring will occur – need to be empowered. Decentralized cooperation and vertically integrated action, which leverage and enable the capacities of local government actors, can make a positive impact on the success of the SDGs.
- The most significant challenges to the universal implementation of the SDGs, and thereby their success, include capacities for progress monitoring and contentions around how they will be financed.

What came of the UN Sustainable Development Summit 2015?

On September 25-27, during the 70th session of the United Nations General Assembly, UN member states convened a special summit for the adoption of the post-2015 development agenda. This special summit concluded with the adoption of the declaration “[Transforming Our](#)

[World - the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#)”, a universal call to action for the betterment of people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership which is unprecedented in both scope and ambition. To catalyze cooperative, transformative action at the international scale, the 2030 Agenda includes a set of 17 universally applicable, integrated objectives for sustainable development, which are accompanied by a total of 169 concrete targets and indicators. These objectives are officially referred to as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The SDGs build upon the expiring [Millennium Development Goals](#) (MDGs): eight targets which guided global action on the reduction of extreme poverty in its multiple dimensions from 2000-2015. While the SDGs maintain the thematic work on poverty eradication targeted by the MDGs, they reflect a comprehensive perspective on international development and sustaining human life on this planet. By providing a set of integrated targets and progress indicators the SDGs are the key to the success of the 2030 Agenda, and will guide the development agendas and national policies of UN member states and their international cooperation over the next 15 years.



The [Sustainable Development Goals \(UN website\)](#)

The road from the MDGs to the SDGs

What were the MDGs?

In September 2000, at the UN Millennium Summit, the UN General Assembly adopted the [United Nations Millennium Declaration](#). The Declaration, which called for a global partnership to reduce extreme poverty, was the first ever global strategy with quantifiable targets to be agreed upon by all UN member states and the world's leading development institutions. To support the Declaration, former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan established eight accompanying objectives. These objectives (listed below) were set with a deadline of 2015 and became known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achieve universal primary education
3. Promote gender equality and empower women
4. Reduce child mortality
5. Improve maternal health
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability
8. Develop a global partnership for development

Were the MDGs successful?

The effectiveness of the MDGs has been the subject of considerable debate. Supporters argue that the development agenda promoted by the MDGs has spearheaded an unprecedented international movement against extreme poverty, reducing it by more than 50 percent globally. Prior to their enactment, individual campaigns aimed at the thematic areas within the MDGs – such as eliminating income poverty and promoting literacy – were already underway, but prior to the MDGs they had not been conceived as a coherent catalog of goals at the global level.

Critics, on the other hand, note that progress on the specific targets set out by the MDGs has been both regionally and thematically unbalanced. This is because many countries adopted a “piecemeal approach”, choosing to engage with some but not all of the MDGs. This has been attributed to the fact that the MDGs only applied to countries of the global South, and that they had collectively played a minimal role in their design. Consequently, the MDGs were perceived by several critics as a platform that was imposed

on the developing countries by the more developed.

What makes the SDGs different?

In sharp contrast to the MDGs, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are uniformly applicable to all countries of the world, removing the “developing” versus “developed” dichotomy that left the MDGs open to criticism. And while there are similarities in regard to the format of the MDGs and the SDGs – e.g. each framed the international development agenda for a 15-year period – the SDGs have significantly expanded on the scale and content of the MDGs.

The SDGs are focused on a global development with-and-for sustainability, and demonstrate an understanding that the environment is not an add-on or in opposition to sustainable development, but rather the base that underpins all other goals. As a result, whereas the MDGs maintained a retrospectively narrow focus on poverty reduction, the SDGs include new themes which reflect an approach that sees the environment, economy and society as embedded systems rather than separate competing “pillars”: e.g. urban areas, water and sanitation, energy, and climate change are all prominently featured.

Another significant difference between the MDGs and SDGs is how they have been created: the crafting of the SDGs has been regarded as an unparalleled participatory policy process, and this is reflected in their scale and ambition. A UN Open Working Group (OWG) made up of 70 countries sharing 30 seats was established in 2013 to draft the SDGs and was tasked with incorporating a range of stakeholders into their negotiation process. As a result, developing countries have been able to provide significant input into the content, as have local and subnational governments, and prominent actors from civil society and the private sector.

What will make the SDGs successful?

The experience of the MDGs demonstrates that when presented with ambitious targets for development, nations will often opt to use their own goals as a benchmark for progress. Because of this, empowering a variety of non-state actors for implementation will be a key driver of their success. For although it seems that monitoring progress on the SDGs will be focused at the national level, cities and urban areas are where a great amount of the implementation and monitoring will occur. Local government authorities and communities need to be empowered accordingly. This means establishing a collaborative balance between local governments, states, and national governments, as well as involving and

maximizing the contributions from stakeholders and all levels of administration within cities and regions - as well as the communities they serve.

Another key to making the SDGs a success will be making sure the cross-cutting issues of sustainable production and consumption are a priority. This can be accomplished by moving towards economic models that are at once sustainable and inclusive. Cities, which are the central hubs of both innovation and the global economy, are where the transition to such sustainable economic models will continue to occur. However, this transition does not only refer to the world's iconic megacities; small and medium-sized cities comprise the statistical majority of urban areas and are experiencing rapid growth rates, yet they are currently facing the most significant resource/capacity gaps. Targeted sustainable economic and institutional development within these urban areas will have a positive impact on the success of the SDGs.

Lastly, with global urbanization forecasted to continue throughout the course of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, we will likely see the persistence of challenges to the SDGs – such as planning, employment, resource management, demographics, and service provision. These challenges require a strategic long-term

planning perspective with focus on the inter-linkages within regions, because progress on the SDGs will not be made if a country is only considered as a separate unit or if a district or city is considered in isolation.

Success within the SDGs that are particularly cross-cutting can best be achieved through effective vertical integration; this means all levels of government working together to align and accelerate strategic actions, mobilize appropriate resources, and engage key stakeholders.

What are the challenges facing the SDGs?

The immediate concern is that the targets established within the SDGs will be considered as the “ceiling” for achievement rather than the “floor” which is necessary for international sustainability. This concern has not been lessened by the challenges to how the SDGs will be implemented, monitored, and financed.

1. Missing out on integration potential - A major challenge facing the successful implementation of the SDGs is the possibility that national governments will choose to focus only on the goals that align with their existing development agenda. The challenge posed by this approach is that the SDGs were designed as an integrated

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals

1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere
2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture
3. Ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages
4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all
9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation
10. Reduce inequality within and among countries
11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts (noting agreements made by the UNFCCC forum)
14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification and halt and reverse land degradation, and halt biodiversity loss
16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels
17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.

[The Sustainable Development Goals \(UN website\)](#)

vehicle for sustainable development; wherever possible, cross-cutting indicators have been put in place, particularly in regard to housing, health, gender equality, production and consumption, and employment. Lack of action on one goal can compromise their collective success.

2. Data and monitoring challenges - As was the case for the MDGs, monitoring of the SDGs will be performed by national statistical offices with the support of various UN agencies. However, many countries were unable to access the capacity necessary to collect, analyze, and disseminate the data required for reporting their progress on the MDGs. There is concern that the SDGs will suffer similar shortfalls in regard to capacity for monitoring, as there are now even more goals and targets which must be monitored.

3. Financing & the North-South divide - The most contentious challenge facing the SDGs is in regard to how they will be financed, as current projections estimate the needs for financing their implementation and monitoring to be around \$17 trillion. It is within this debate that the “developed” versus “developing” country dichotomy re-emerges. “Developed” countries are pushing for the mobilization of domestic resources, wherein each UN

member state will be responsible for securing its own funding, whereas “developing” countries are calling for financing to be provided by the “developed” countries through aid agreements. A solution may lie within a development finance model that can leverage and catalyze a combination of private investment, international and domestic public resources; however, without an answer to the finance question, the ambitious scope of the SDGs may be curtailed.

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03: The Urban SDG, Goal #11

04: The importance of each SDG for cities

05: Implementing the SDGs

06: Measuring, Monitoring and Evaluating SDGs

07: Towards a New Urban Agenda

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Further Reading

- United Nations (2000) 55/2. United Nations Millennium Declaration. Online. (<http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.pdf>)
- United Nations (2015) The Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development. Online. (http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/CONF.227/L.1)
- United Nations (2015) Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform. Online. (<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>)
- Dodds F. (2015) Negotiating the Sustainable Development Goals: A transformational agenda for an insecure world. Routledge Environment & Sustainability Posts. Online. (<https://www.routledge.com/sustainability/posts/8516>)



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