

GLOBAL WARNING

# How to Set Goals

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How to Set Goals

COPENHAGEN – At this century’s start, leaders from every country agreed to pursue the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals. The ambition was to improve significantly the lot of the planet’s most disadvantaged citizens before 2015.

The intention was laudable, but 11 years on, progress in achieving the MDGs has been uneven. As decision-makers start to consider what our aspirations should be after the deadline has expired, it is worth looking back at what worked, what didn’t, and how we could do better.



The targets set by the MDGs basically amounted to a list of “things that would be good to achieve.” We have made progress on almost all of them, but not nearly enough on most. We have done reasonably well at ensuring that a child born in 2015 is likely to face fewer material burdens than his or her parents. But significant challenges and massive inequalities remain. As always, we should ask ourselves how we could ensure faster progress.

The MDGs comprised eight sweeping statements of ambition: the world decided to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and empower women; reduce child mortality rates; improve maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability; and develop a global partnership for development.

These goals were underpinned by concrete targets. We aimed, for example, to halve the proportion of people living on less than \$1 a day; to achieve decent employment for women, men, and young people; to reduce by three-quarters the maternal mortality rate; and to reduce by two-thirds the under-five mortality rate.

Nobody could argue with any of these goals. But their formulation is inconsistent. Why aim to reduce poverty by half, maternal mortality by three-quarters, and under-five mortality by two-thirds? Why set specific reduction targets in these areas, and yet remain vague on our desire to “achieve decent employment”?

And why these particular goals? Why aspire to improve access to information technology (the Internet, mobile phones) but not to basic energy? Today, 1.6 billion people do not have electricity; when the sun sets, their lives are literally beset by darkness. And why no target to reduce the 1.4 million deaths each year from indoor air pollution, largely caused by the use of poor fuels like wood, cardboard, and dung for cooking and heating?

The MDGs have been helpful in focusing attention on some areas of need. Clean water and sanitation, deforestation, and gender inequality in education are not topics that receive much media attention or focus in developed countries. The MDGs helped to ensure that these issues did not disappear from the policy agenda, and, partly as a result, there has been progress in at least the first two areas.

But we could have gone a step further and paid closer attention to the areas where we could achieve the most good. We actually knew back in 2000 that we were unlikely to achieve the goals: the World Bank estimated that in addition to policy and service-delivery reform in many countries, annual overseas development aid would need to increase by \$50 billion.

Instead of agreeing to broad aspirations, it would have been more worthwhile to use the goals to highlight specific, more achievable investments. According to an analysis by Nobel laureates and other prestigious economists for the Copenhagen Consensus Center, these investments include expanded immunization for children, efforts to lower the price of schooling, and initiatives to end the "silent hunger" of micronutrient deficiency.

Despite the MDGs' breadth, one issue received the most attention by far over the past decade: global warming. Indeed, among world leaders and policymakers, no other development-related issue came close. The European Union's climate policy is costing \$250 billion a year, enough to have achieved all of the Millennium Development Goals. Yet its impact on global temperature in a hundred years will be immeasurable.

When it comes to "doing good" in the world, there is a big difference between focusing on problems and focusing on solutions. Global warming highlights this contrast. We understandably focus on the problem, and then take for granted that a global carbon-reduction deal is the only logical solution.

But such a comprehensive deal appears to be politically impossible, and has been shown to be incredibly ineffective. While global warming is a serious challenge (and will exacerbate other problems), cutting carbon emissions is a poor solution – and a poor use of funds compared to the alternatives.

Finding the smartest solutions to problems requires prioritizing – an effort that the MDGs do not explicitly make, and which many people find distasteful. But if we do not explicitly choose between policies based on their effectiveness, often the decision is made for us by other factors, including which issue attracts the most media attention or has self-interested corporations and activists pushing for a specific investment.

An overarching theme of the MDGs was to reduce poverty. We will succeed, by 2015, in halving the proportion of people whose income is less than \$1 a day. But this is thanks almost entirely to the massive economic strides taken by China and India, which show how effectively trade can reduce poverty. Yet developed countries have rendered politically impossible reforms that would reduce trade barriers for developing countries. While we have spent all of our time writing a successor treaty to the Kyoto Protocol, we have all but forgotten the Doha Round of trade talks.

Overall, the Millennium Development Goals improved the planet. But when we set new goals in 2015, we will need to be much more honest about focusing on areas where we can achieve the most good.

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