

Will 2015 be the year the world agrees how to live sustainably?

July 25 2014, by John Thwaites, David Griggs And Tahl Kestin



The Sustainable Development Goals will aim to tackle pollution as well as poverty. Credit: Alex Proimos/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY

Next year will be critical in environmental diplomacy. World governments will be negotiating important global agreements in two areas that will have a major impact on our well-being in coming decades, including the legal framework for climate action beyond 2020.

The second, far less well-known – but potentially just as important – agreement is about setting global [Sustainable Development Goals](#), to follow on from the poverty-focused [Millennium Development Goals](#) that will end in 2015.

After a year and a half of negotiations, a picture is emerging of what those goals are likely to be: tackling poverty, hunger, inequality and environmental damage, not just in the developing world but throughout the globe.

Setting the goals

This week, an Open Working Group of the United Nations General Assembly released a set of [proposed Sustainable Development Goals and targets](#). This proposal will form the basis of negotiation between countries about the goals over the next year, leading to a final decision at the United Nations in September 2015.

The Sustainable Development Goals are one of the main outcomes of the [United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development](#), also called the "Rio+20" summit, held in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012.

Countries [agreed at Rio+20](#) that, with the period of the Millennium Development Goals drawing to an end in 2015, new goals are needed to continue the fight against poverty. But they decided these goals should be broadened to tackle inequality and global environmental degradation.

Unlike the millennium goals, which were aimed at developing countries, the sustainability goals will apply to the whole world. They will be a benchmark against which nations' performance on economic growth, social inclusion and environmental sustainability will be measured.

What are the targets?

The working group's proposal includes 17 goals and more than 160 targets. The proposed goals and targets continue the focus on ending poverty and hunger, but also include goals for social inclusion, health, education, economic growth and jobs, and reducing inequality. Importantly, the proposal also includes goals for water, energy, sustainable consumption and production, ecosystems and tackling climate change. The proposal also suggests goals and targets for sustainable cities, infrastructure and governance.

Despite contention, there is a proposed goal on promoting peaceful and inclusive societies and access to justice and targets on sexual and reproductive health rights.

There are probably too many suggested goals and targets, and the list needs to be consolidated. However, there has been remarkable agreement among the representatives of 70 countries who have put together the proposal.

Australia's role

It is easy to see that many of the goals are as relevant to Australia as they are to the rest of the world. [Australia faces challenges](#) of increasing inequality, high greenhouse gas emissions, and threats to biodiversity. The Sustainable Development Goals can help to guide Australia's response to these problems.

[Cynics might scoff](#) at the United Nations' efforts and argue that the goals are bureaucratic and meaningless. But these critics ignore the real, positive impact that concrete goals and targets can have on governments, businesses and communities.

Neither the Millennium Development Goals nor the proposed Sustainable Development Goals are legally enforceable. Yet the millennium goals provided both a spur and a guide to action, and a benchmark against which governments and communities could assess their performance. Many developing countries have included achievement of the millennium goals in their national development plans, and used them to reduce poverty and target better health and education.

Over the past 20 years, global poverty rates have halved and about 700 million fewer people now live in extreme poverty. More than 2 billion people have gained access to improved water sources and the target of halving the number of people without safe water has been [met ahead of schedule](#).

More people around the world can read and write, more go to school, and more women are getting an education – a key factor in reducing population growth and improving child survival. The Millennium Development Goals are not the sole reason for these improvements, but they have certainly contributed.

However, in two critical respects the millennium goals have not been successful. Despite the improvement in economic and social indicators since 2000, inequality within most countries (including Australia) has worsened. At the same time, the scale of humans' impact on the planet has reached dangerous levels. The environment is in peril.

Secrets of success

Why have some of the Millennium Development Goals been more successful than others?

One of the answers lies in the trade-offs between different goals or

objectives which make solutions much more complex to find. It is relatively easy to grasp the issue of providing more safe water. It is much more complex and challenging to balance the trade-offs inherent in achieving energy sufficiency without excessive carbon emissions; in achieving food security without damaging biodiversity; and in becoming economically competitive without increasing inequality.

This is why, in developing and implementing the Sustainable Development Goals, the ability to solve problems from many different points of view will be critical.

There are sweet spots between economic development, social inclusion and environmental sustainability. But finding them will require collaboration between governments, business, and people with skills in many disciplines.

In Australia, for example, in the last decade we significantly reduced water use in agriculture while increasing agricultural value through a combination of the water market, business strategies and better technologies. But we still have a long way to go in achieving [environmental sustainability](#), and have much to learn from other countries about achieving [social inclusion](#) at the same time as economic growth.

It is early days, but the Sustainable Development Goals may help us get there.

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