

WHAT ARE SDGs AND WHY SHOULD I CARE?
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Unless you are a hermit living on locusts and wild honey and having no interaction with other people or news media, you have been hearing phrases such as “this is the last generation that can save the planet” and “this is the first generation that can eradicate extreme poverty.” The international community has devised some tools it hopes will be helpful in effecting a halt to environmental degradation and to bringing people to a decent standard of living. These tools are called the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

So where did they come from, where are they going and what are we supposed to do with them?

Genesis

A long time ago in a kingdom far away (1972 in Stockholm, Sweden) the United Nations held a meeting to delineate the rights of the human family to a healthy and productive environment. Like any meeting this one generated committees and more meetings.

In 1980 an international conservation group published a document in which the group asserted that conservation of nature cannot be achieved without development to alleviate the poverty and misery of hundreds of millions of people. The document stressed the interdependence of conservation and development in which development depends on caring for the earth. The concept of sustainable development found a role in the drama of world politics. Seven years later a UN commission formulated a “global agenda for change” in which it wove together social, economic, cultural and environmental issues.

In June 1992, the first UN Conference on Environment and Development was held in Rio de Janeiro. The conference produced a declaration which recognized each nation’s right to pursue social and economic progress and assigned to States the responsibility of adopting a model of sustainable development. (This conference also was the first time the UN invited the participation of non-national government entities in its work. Designated as “Major Groups,” organizations of women, youth, trade unions, indigenous people, NGOs, business, science, agriculture and local authorities {municipalities}, had a say in the deliberations.) The first item set forth in the Rio Declaration was “Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.”

In 2000 The UN held a Millennium Summit and from that meeting came the Millennium Development Goals. The Goals became a global report card for tasks to be achieved by 2015:

1. To eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. To achieve universal primary education
3. To promote gender equality and empower women
4. To reduce child mortality
5. To improve maternal health
6. To combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases
7. To ensure environmental sustainability
8. To develop a global partnership for development

Although some progress was made in some categories by some countries, the world did not get an A (or even a C) on its report card. Some weaknesses identified with the goals were

- √ paucity of means of grass-roots engagement,
- √ lack of financial resources,
- √ an agenda designed to have developed nations help less-developed nations and
- √ lack of political will.

At the 2012 UN Sustainable Development Conference, world leaders along with thousands of participants from the private sector (NGOs and other groups) came together to shape how poverty can be reduced, social equity advanced and environmental protection ensured on an ever more crowded planet. The official discussions focused on two main themes:

- how to build a green economy to achieve sustainable development and lift people out of poverty and
- how to improve international coordination for sustainable development.

The work of the meeting was summarized in a paper titled, *The Future We Want*.

Following this an open working group of states (OWG) was established at the UN and tasked with developing a post 2015 development agenda and articulating a new set of goals to continue the progress made by efforts to meet the MDGS.

Exodus

The OWG consulted governments, major groups, experts and ordinary people around the world to distill a set of goals for the 2015-2030 period. The following 17 goals are the product of their work.

- Goal 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere
- Goal 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
- Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
- Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
- Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
- Goal 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
- Goal 7: Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
- Goal 8: Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
- Goal 9: Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation
- Goal10: Reduce inequality within and among countries
- Goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
- Goal 12: ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
- Goal 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts*
- Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
- Goal 15: Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests combat desertification and halt and reverse land degradation and half biodiversity loss
- Goal 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.

Goal 17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

There are 169 targets that identify specific items under these goals. For example, a target under the first goal (end poverty) is to establish nationally appropriate social protection systems and a target under the third goal (ensure healthy lives and promote well-being) is to end preventable deaths of newborns and children under 5 years of age by 2030.

The UN Secretary General weighed in with a “synthesis report” (*The Road to Dignity*) that stressed six elements for a successful post-2015-- dignity, people, planet, justice, prosperity and partnerships. Despite nations’ resistance and haggling along the way, all the goals and targets survived and were accepted by world leaders in September, 2015.

Revelation

There is little doubt that the final declaration, goals and targets are pretty. What is up for grabs is whether the SDGs will gather dust on shelves or whether they will be put into action. That is where civil society (you, me and the horse you rode in on) will make a difference. Governments are the entities that have the power to “make it happen.” Governments are susceptible to pressure and pressure must be brought to bear to stiffen backbones and strengthen political will to make the hard choices that will pave the “Road to Dignity” for all.

Indicators that will measure whether or not goals are reached will be developed in the months and years to come. We need to be attentive that these technical matters do not overpower or water down the human concerns of the goals. In our ministries we can focus on actions that educate people about their rights, promote the goals and walk with politicians and ordinary people to ensure the best possible outcome.

Differentiating the SDGs from the MDGs is the fact that the SDGs are universal—they apply to all countries. The MDGs were a program for the poor—and you know the axiom, “A program for the poor is a poor program.” Of tremendous importance to attaining the SDGs will be availability of the necessary resources. Business as usual where money moves from developing countries to developed countries cannot continue. Economic development, environmental sustainability and social inclusion—decent jobs, sensitivity to the needs of mother earth and fairness—are pillars founded on human dignity and support human rights. Can we be good architects and build our homes around these pillars?

God is not stingy. Our planet is rich. Are we fair enough to be generous and generous enough to be fair?