

Promises, promises: Our history of pledging a better world

Political leaders have promised a better world for centuries, and, most often, they have failed to deliver. Sometimes, however, international cooperation has significantly improved life. It's important that we learn from these successes and failures.

Many international promises of peace and prosperity have come and gone. The League of Nations, founded in 1920, arose with a [promise](#) “to promote international cooperation and to achieve international peace and security.” It failed, and World War II ensued.

In 1945, the United Nations was born out of this disaster. The founders tried to [learn](#) from the League's mistakes, giving the body fewer veto powers and—most important to our discussion—an additional focus on social and economic issues. In the preamble of the UN Charter, right after peace, it promises “[to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom](#).” Yes, world peace matters, but it also matters that people are not hungry, not poor, and not uneducated.

Unfortunately, many of the following decades were witness to unfulfilled UN promises, despite good intentions. [Take education, for example](#): From 1950 to 2000, there were at least 12 different UN-sponsored declarations promising schooling for everyone. They all failed. In 1961, the Addis Ababa Plan promised free education for all Africans by 1980. Come 1980, about half of all children of primary school age in Africa were still out of school.

The unfortunate reality is that politicians like to deal in noble-sounding aspirational vows that have delivery dates far into the future. They get the glory now, and the difficulty of delivering on these often vague or impossibly ambitious promises is someone else's problem. Not surprisingly, sweeping declarations that don't consider the world's limited resources are rarely the best way to deliver real good.

The Millennium Development Goals actually changed the world

In September 2000, something quite remarkable happened. The world's noblest aspirations to do good were channeled into something that was concrete and had fixed deadlines—and it actually improved the world.

The so-called Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were created just by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and a close circle of aides with little public deliberation or government participation. Annan and his staff worked behind closed doors with technocrats at the International Monetary Fund, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the World Bank. The resulting plan was short and powerful: Eight goals and 18 specific targets.

They set out targets that almost everyone in the world would agree are priorities: To reduce poverty and hunger, fight disease, provide access to clean water, and get every boy and every girl in school. All were subject to a hard deadline: December 31, 2015. When 100 heads of state and 47 heads of government—then the largest meeting of world leaders in history—gathered in New York for the United Nations Millennium Summit, they agreed to this simple list of ambitious promises.

Over the next 15 years, governments of rich and poor nations, international institutions, and private foundations poured billions of dollars more than they had previously into development, aiming to achieve these MDGs. Global development aid alone almost [doubled](#) in real terms. [Global funding](#) for child health increased eightfold from less than \$1 billion annually in the 1990s to \$8 billion in 2015. While the world didn't reach all of the MDGs' targets, this huge investment [turbocharged](#) progress toward them.

In other words, this short list of priorities helped real people achieve better lives—more children and mothers survived, fewer people starved, and almost all boys and, crucially, almost all girls at least started school.

One good example of how life improved is the significant drop in child mortality. In 1990, almost 12 million children under the age of five died every year (see Figure 2.1). By 2015, that number had halved to 6 million each year. If you look at a graph, it's easy to fall into an analytical way of thinking and lose a sense of just how immense that was. Yet, in 2015, the death of 6 million kids every year was averted—that's the same as the entire population of Maryland. Put another way, almost 12 million parents, or about the population of Belgium, were saved from having to suffer the loss of a child. Each and every year.

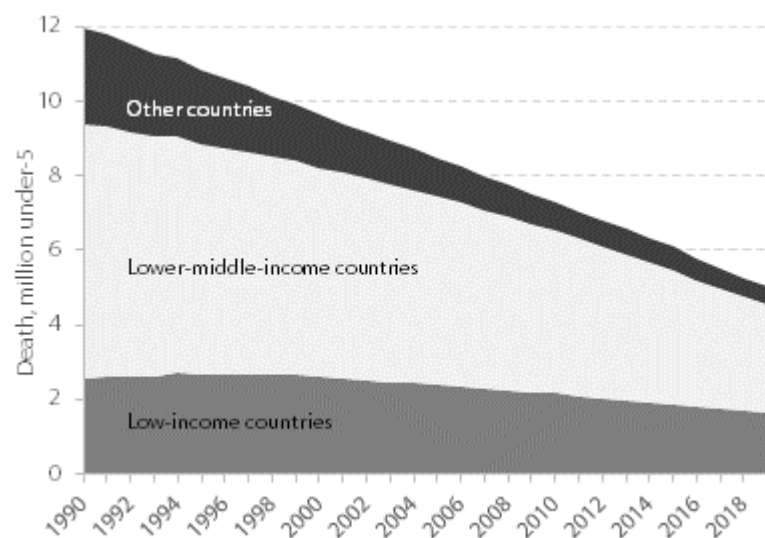


Figure 2.1 Death of children under five years of age, in millions, 1990–2019, for low-income countries, lower-middle-income countries, and the rest of the world.

This amazing feat alone took away more than one-tenth of all global deaths. That's not a story that we hear much about—more deaths usually make for more eye-catching news than more lives that happily continue—but it's an incredibly important achievement.

Of course, if we put our analytical glasses back on, it's clear that not all of this was due to the MDGs. Child mortality had been declining for a long time before the MDGs were adopted, especially in the richer part of the world. Part of this progress would undoubtedly have happened anyway, as the world became richer, making it easier for parents and states to afford healthcare, better food, and more safety and security.

But if you look at the poorer half of the world, the MDGs sped up the reduction in deaths significantly.

When I refer to ‘the poorer half of the world,’ I mean the lower two segments in Figure 2.1, or low- and lower-middle-income countries, which is a World Bank [categorization](#) of countries based on a per-person income level¹ that this book will use frequently. Low-income countries are the world’s poorest, where each person, on average, makes less than \$1,085 a year or just under \$3 a day. In lower-middle-income countries, people earn up to almost \$12 a day. To put all these figures into context, the average daily income in China is \$33, and across high-income countries (or the rich world), it is \$132.

Most of the world’s 28 low-income countries are in Africa, along with war-torn Syria and Yemen and the broken state of North Korea. In total, they are home to around [700](#) million people. The 54 nations that qualify as lower-middle income have a combined population of 3.4 billion. Together, these two groups of countries are home to 4.1 billion people or slightly over half the entire global population.

As Figure 2.1 shows, the annual child deaths in low-income countries were stuck at 2.5 million throughout the 1990s. It’s only after the adoption of the MDGs in 2000 and funding for children’s health increased dramatically that these deaths started to decline. A [2018 study in World Development](#) found that reductions in child deaths accelerated after 2000 and likely because of the MDGs. That speed-up, both in low- and lower-middle-income countries, saved between 10 and 19 million children’s lives over the period.

The study similarly finds that progress sped up for many of the other MDGs. By the 2015 deadline, most kids were in schools—a particularly notable achievement in the case of girls who, in many poorer nations, face more obstacles to education than boys. The world managed to reduce three of the biggest infectious disease killers: Tuberculosis, malaria, and HIV. It almost halved the fraction of the malnourished in the developing world from 23% to 13%.

The world also saw progress on other targets but without a pronounced MDG speed-up. The world provided access to clean drinking water to 1.9 billion more people, but this would likely have happened based on previous trends.

Similarly, the world saw an incredible reduction in extreme poverty, although not predominantly caused by the MDGs but instead by a growth surge in middle-income countries, including China. Extreme poverty means living at the edge of survival. You might have heard it defined as people living on less than a dollar a day, but that was a long time ago. Today, with inflation, the limit is [\\$2.15](#).

In 1990, 1.9 billion people—a third of the world—lived in grueling extreme poverty. By 2015, this number had more than halved to 836 million. Today, it has been reduced further to [674](#) million. Over the past 32 years, poverty has declined by 113,000 people every day.ⁱ

The MDGs didn’t drive all global successes, and not all goals were achieved. For instance, the MDG’s promise on child mortality was to cut it from 12 million to 4 million, and we ‘only’ cut it to 6 million.

Yet, overall, the MDGs were incredibly successful. They saved millions of lives, got almost all children in school, and avoided hundreds of millions of people starving. The world was

¹ It is actually based on Gross National Income per person, a close relative to GDP per person, which is close to income per person.

fundamentally a much better place in 2015 compared to previous decades, and this was partly because of the MDGs.

The Sustainable Development Goals: Far Too Many Promises

Not surprisingly, the UN wanted to replicate the MDG's success. As the deadline for the MDGs neared, the UN began a process to identify their replacement. Some influential voices said the world should stick with the MDGs—they were simple, effective, and still had plenty of room for more progress. I was among those who said we should take a hard look at all the potential promises, identify the most efficient policies, and do those first.

But many more and louder voices wanted the UN to tackle a far larger number of issues and listen to a much broader range of people in forming its new list of promises. An entire industry of working groups and researchers popped up, pumping out reams of well-intentioned recommendations. In total, more than 1,400 different suggested promises were on the table for leaders to consider.

In the end, the UN—and [all countries](#)—adopted a set of global goals called the Sustainable Development Goals or the SDGs. Running from 2016 to 2030, the SDGs have 169 targets, spread out across 17 goals or themes, far beyond the MDGs' 18 targets and eight goals. In fact, the new list is so impossibly long and ambitious that it is no surprise that it has generated little progress.

Among the SDG's many promises, there are priorities that most of us would agree belong at the top of the agenda for world leaders and development organizations. These are targets that could save millions of lives, help billions of people, and transform societies—including tackling extreme poverty and hunger, limiting infectious diseases, improving education, and ensuring access to affordable energy and banking services.

But alongside such crucially important targets are many others that are decidedly less momentous, such as promoting [sustainable tourism](#), boosting [organic foods](#), or insisting on [green public spaces](#) for disabled people. Don't get me wrong: Ensuring that disabled people have accessible public parks is a well-intentioned consideration, and it is right that cities contemplate such priorities. But putting promises like this one—or the promotion of organic apples—on the same level as the momentous promises above is jarring in a world where hundreds of millions of people are still starving.

Other targets promise nice things with little indication of how to achieve them. One [promises](#) “full and productive employment and decent work for every single woman and man, including for young people and persons with disabilities.” Yet, it isn't like most political leaders aren't already aware of the importance of delivering jobs. If there was a simple and effective way to meet this target, it would already be done. Similarly, the SDGs insist we must “[promote peaceful](#)” societies. Of course, peace is desirable, but without some policy innovation to make it more achievable, the admonition merely restates centuries of pious wishes.

Still, other targets can be achieved but are tremendously costly. For instance, the SDGs promise “[social protection systems and measures for all](#),” which essentially means achieving a basic welfare system for all countries, including disability and old age provisions. Yet, there is no

consideration that doing so would cost [way beyond a trillion dollars](#) a year by 2030, even if we excluded rich countries.

Finally, some SDG targets are simply difficult to understand. One of the ten education promises reads more as a rambling parody of good intentions, [promising](#) to “ensure all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.” Even the UN appears to struggle to define what this means concretely.

Many of these additional targets revolve around issues that are particularly important to well-meaning and well-off people who live relatively comfortable lives in wealthy communities around the world, a long way from imminent hunger or death from infectious diseases. Of course, supporters would argue that, unlike the MDGs, the SDGs are meant to apply to all countries, including the rich. But not only has this not actually registered in the policies of well-off nations—you won’t hear US, German, or UK domestic politics framed by SDGs. It is also indicative of a basic planning flaw because the world has tried to use one unified set of promises to deal with problems that affect everyone, from the poorest to the richest.

The MDGs were focused on obviously important and eminently solvable problems, like hunger and disease. They provided concrete goals that could be achieved to help the world’s poorer half relatively efficiently. The SDGs, by contrast, promise everything to everyone—rich or poor.

The SDGs haven’t made a difference

It could be argued that we should be able to do many things at the same time. Surely, we can both end hunger *and* promote sustainable tourism, fix education systems *and* make more green spaces. Indeed, around the start of the SDGs, people seemed to suggest that the sheer scale of the promises would generate a groundswell of excitement that would marshal many additional resources across all these many different areas.

Sadly, the evidence now shows otherwise. The MDGs boosted enthusiasm: Global development aid almost [doubled](#). There was no similar surge after 2015; aid saw a small uptick that was almost entirely in line with rich countries’ GDP growth. Moreover, the available data shows that there hasn’t been any acceleration in progress toward fulfilling the SDGs.

Of course, it is almost impossible to deliver hard data on all or even most of the SDGs. Imagine trying to define how far we’ve progressed on the rambling education target above—let alone find data over many years for hundreds of nations, including the world’s poorest and least measured.

Nonetheless, a team of academics, including Jeffrey Sachs, [advisor](#) to the UN Secretary-General on the SDGs, have combed through more than a hundred measures to estimate progress on all of the SDGs and on each of the 17 individual thematic goals and have expressed progress for each one as a percent. The index is [constructed](#) to be easily understandable: When Sweden, for instance, attains an 85% overall SDG score, it means that Sweden is 15% from fully achieving the SDGs.



Figure 2.2 Global SDG index, fulfillment of all SDGs, 2000–2021.

We can see how the world is doing across all the SDG promises in Figure 2.2. Overall, we’re making progress. This is not all that surprising, given that the SDGs are generally about good things, and as the world has become richer, we have been able to afford more good things.

However, we see a complete stall in progress in 2020 and 2021, likely because of the Covid pandemic, which precipitated many shutdowns and increased economic hardship.

But crucially, we see [no speed-up](#) around 2015. From 2010 to 2019, progress in the areas that the SDGs are meant to tackle was progressing at about the same rate every year. In other words, we were literally doing just as well on the SDGs *before* we even came up with them as we did after they existed.

This offers compelling evidence that promising everything didn’t help accelerate progress. The SDGs, so far, simply have had no observable, additional effect on development.

We will be half a century late

The global SDG promises run from 2016 to 2030. This means that in mid-2023, we are at halftime for the SDGs. Yet, we are nowhere near halfway.

Figure 2.3 gives a sense of just how far behind we are: If the world continues the current trends—excluding the anomalous Covid stall of 2020–21—we will reach the 100% mark for the SDGs after 2078, almost half a century late.

This is not an actual prediction. It is very plausible that when countries get closer to 100%, they will shift their spending and attention elsewhere. But it is a very simple way to describe the difference between what the world promised would be achieved in 2030 and what, even optimistically, we will deliver.

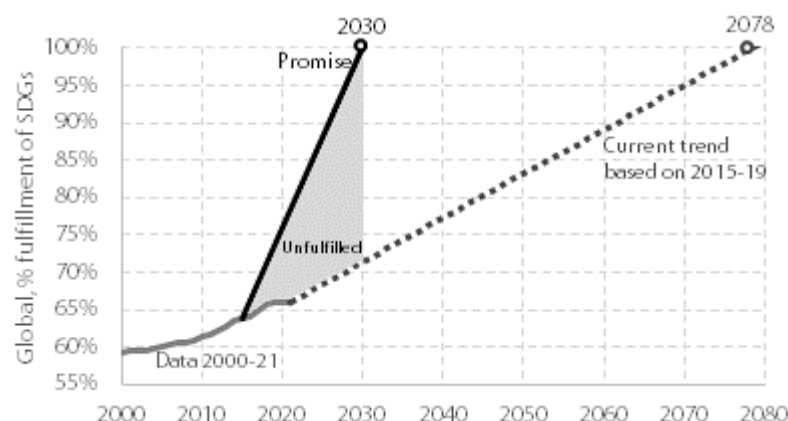


Figure 2.3 Global fulfillment of all SDGs, based on 2000–2021 data, the trend after 2021, and the path to the 2030 goal. The shaded area shows the unfulfilled promise for 2030.

Every country grouping will be late, but not at the same rate, as Figure 2.4 shows. Lower-middle-income countries will ‘only’ be 38 years late, whereas low-income countries will be almost a century late. High-income countries will be a whopping 150 years late. The slower rate of delivery in high-income countries supports the idea that nations may actually prioritize issues other than the SDGs the closer they get to achieving them.

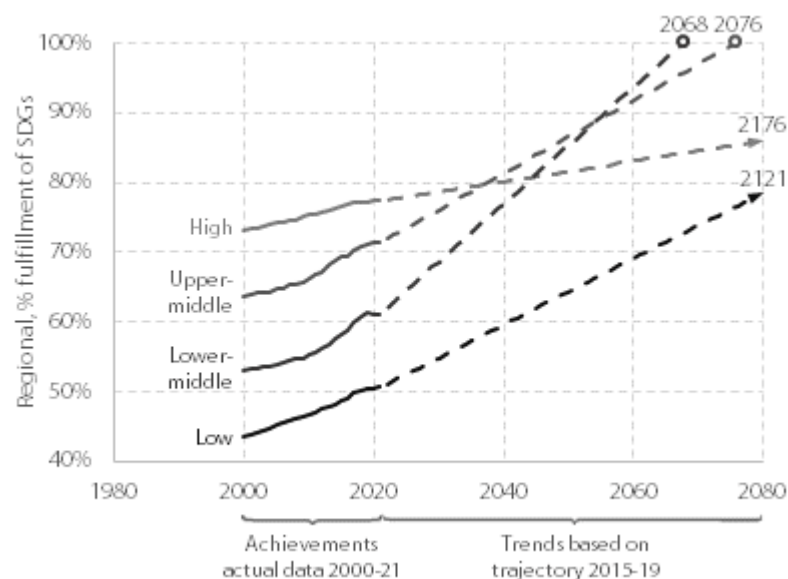


Figure 2.4 Global and low- to high-income country groups on all SDGs based on data from 2000–2021 and trends after 2021.

There is also a range in time for how late each of the 17 broad thematic goals in the SDGs will be realized, though, again, all will arrive late. Table 2.1 shows when the lower-middle-income countries as a whole will fulfill these 17 individual goals based on current trends. None of them will be reached by 2030.

Table 2.1 The 17 goals and year reached based on 2015–19 trends for lower-middle income countries. “Never” means the indicators are trending away from the goal.

Goal	Year reached
Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	2034
No Poverty	2037
Decent Work and Economic Growth	2046
Quality Education	2052
Affordable and Clean Energy	2061
Zero Hunger	2071
Good Health and Well-being	2080
Clean Water and Sanitation	2089
Gender Equality	2101
Peace and Justice Strong Institutions	2127
Partnerships to Achieve the Goal	2147
Life Below Water	2220
Sustainable Cities and Communities	2226
Reduced Inequality	2235
Life on Land	Never
Responsible Consumption and Production	Never
Climate Action	Never

Not surprisingly, the infrastructure goal, which is measured by internet access and cell phone coverage, will be quickly met, as will the poverty goal, followed by those covering economic growth, education, energy, and hunger. The health targets take longer, and water and sanitation even longer, along with gender equality. The remaining goals will be a century or more delayed. The last three goals will never be met based on current trends because those trends are headed in the wrong direction.

Almost all SDG goals measure an underlying factor of an improving society (people getting richer, better educated, less hungry, healthier, etc.). These factors are interrelated: When health goes up, education tends to improve as well, as do most of the goals. But this is not so for two of the goals: Responsible consumption and climate. The data shows that progress on these two goals tends to be associated with *decreases* in almost all other parameters.ⁱⁱ Perhaps this is why all income groups are trending *away* from responsible consumption and production because few politicians want to champion progress on one goal, which means regression in most others.

But even on the ‘achievable’ SDGs, the world is failing. We are not delivering faster, and we’re not first delivering where it could do the most good. We can do better.

ⁱ 37.8% poverty in 1990, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.DDAY?locations=XM-XN-1W>, 5.29 billion, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=XM-XN-1W>, so 2 billion. Now, 0.674 billion, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/september-2022-global-poverty-update-world-bank-2017-ppps-and-new-data-india>, or 1.3 billion from 1990–2022, or 32 years. That is 113,494 people each day.

ⁱⁱ <https://github.com/sdsna/2018GlobalIndex/raw/master/2018GlobalIndexMethodology.pdf>, p. 25.