

The UN Adopts Historic Sustainable Development Goals

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On Sept. 25, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted new sustainable development goals (SDGs) during its Summit on Sustainable Development. The SDGs were adopted by 193 countries and were the culmination of three years of negotiations. They take a holistic approach to sustainable development, setting economic, social and environmental targets that tackle poverty, inequality and climate change. The 17 SDGs are composed of 169 more specific, measurable targets, and will be in place through 2030. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) preceded the SDGs and expire at the end of this year.

It is only fitting that a day for setting ambitious and visionary goals should be marked with an address by Pope Francis during his visit to America. Francis has not held back his opinions on the state of environmental stewardship and his desire for drastic improvement. Building on his encyclical letter, *Laudato Si'*, Francis spoke of a "right of the environment" and stated that "any harm done to the environment, therefore is harm done to humanity." He continued his call for an end to the "selfish and boundless thirst for power and material prosperity" and the growing "culture of waste."

Francis also spoke of the need to ensure access to "essential material and spiritual goods: housing, dignified and properly remunerated employment, adequate food and drinking water; religious freedom and, more generally, spiritual freedom and education." Reoccurring themes of the SDGs are inequality and the social and economic exclusion that Francis often raises. Many of the SDGs strive to raise the baseline to ease the suffering of the most vulnerable and shrink the gap between the haves and the have-nots. For example, Goal 1 is to end extreme poverty by 2030. Francis strongly endorsed the goal of ending poverty, as well as ensuring quality education for all. Francis believes that the right to education is a necessary prerequisite to ending poverty and healing our environment.

Goal 2 addresses the need to end hunger and achieve food security through better nutrition and more sustainable agriculture. The targets include ending hunger and malnutrition and ensuring access to safe and nutritious food year-round by 2030. Additional targets include doubling agricultural productivity and the incomes of small-scale food producers. Ensuring sustainable food production systems and resilient agricultural practices that support natural ecosystems, improve our soils, and adapt to climate change and extreme weather conditions are also targets.

Other goals include universal health care and completion of secondary school, including education for all girls by 2030. Goal 11 addresses sustainable planning and encourages cities to develop their own sustainable development plans, such as New York City's OneNYC, which focuses on the environment and income inequality.

Goal 13 is taking urgent action to combat climate change. This goal has received widespread attention. The specific targets include strengthening resiliency and adaptation to climate-related hazards and natural disasters, integrating preparations into specific national policies and planning, and improving education and early warning systems. Specifically, the goal provides for the implementation of the commitment made by developed countries in the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change to raise \$100 billion annually by 2020 to address the needs of developing countries for mitigation.

While the SDGs are not legally binding, they will be tested by the Paris climate talks (COP21) set to take place next month among the same partner countries. Leaders are optimistic that effective agreements can be crafted to cut carbon emissions and assist the most vulnerable countries in adapting to climate change.

Several of the goals focus on environmental conservation measures. Goal 14 addresses the need to sustainably manage marine and coastal ecosystems. The goal sets a target of conserving a minimum of 10 percent of coastal and marine areas by 2020. Other targets for 2020 include regulating harvesting and ending overfishing. Goal 15 seeks to provide for sustainable forest management and conservation, as well as to repair land and soil that has suffered desertification. This goal also seeks to reduce the loss of habitat and biodiversity by 2020.

Goal 6 focuses on the improved management of the world's water resources, with specific targets of equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water and a reduction in water pollution. Other targets include improving water-use efficiency and protecting water-related ecosystems. Goal 7 is ensuring access to "affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all" by 2030.

The SDGs wisely recognize the interrelatedness of all the goals and the necessity of taking a holistic approach to achieve them. For example, the SDGs acknowledge that controlling greenhouse gas emissions and implementing climate change adaptation policies are critical not only to environmental goals but also to sustaining economic growth and eradicating poverty.

There are, however, some inherent contradictions. While Goal 7 seeks access to modern energy for all, Goal 13 strives to take urgent action to combat climate change through reducing carbon emissions. Additionally, the SDGs still provide for increased economic GDP growth while it is recognized by many that certain sustainability goals are undermined by continued economic growth through habits of consumption and consumerism.

One of the biggest challenges to implementation of the SDGs may be determining how to measure progress. The SDGs provide for annual national progress reviews and heads of state meetings every four years. One prevalent issue is the lack of availability of accurate data, necessary to measure progress toward the SDGs. The specific indicators for measuring progress against each goal are still under discussion and are expected to be released in March. Accountability and funding are also possible challenges to implementation of the SDGs. As for successfully implementing the SDGs, Danish Prime Minister Lars Rasmussen put it succinctly: "History will judge us."

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