

Correspondence

SDGs: affordable and more essential now

Your call to scale back the ambitions of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs; see *Nature* 583, 331–332; 2020) conflates two issues. The first is whether the goals are technically and financially feasible. The second is whether they are likely to be accomplished under current policies.

The SDGs are, in principle, still affordable and achievable. But they are being undermined by the chronic failure of the United States and other rich nations to honour the goal of international partnership (SDG 17), as well as by failures in international cooperation and domestic governance of many countries.

Criticisms have not demonstrated any technological or operational obstacles to achieving the SDGs. Academic studies, commission reports and policy analyses suggest that there are pathways to success in areas such as energy decarbonization, sustainable land use and food systems, education for all, disease control and public health. They rely on a combination of policies, including transfers of public funds to poor people, public financing of health care and education, and increased public and private investment in infrastructure.

The goals are affordable. Assessments by the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network and others confirm that the SDGs can be financed at a cost of about 2% of global gross domestic product, with around 0.4% in development aid to fill the gaps in lower-income countries. Ambitious goals unleash innovations to accelerate progress and bring down costs, particularly through the use of new technologies.

In this way, ambitious



Maasai teacher Isaac Mkalia consults his mobile phone in Kenya.

goals have helped to achieve tremendous advances in the control of infectious diseases that many experts had considered impossible (J. D. Sachs and G. Schmidt-Traub *Science* 356, 32–33; 2017). However, most rich nations do not spend the minimum target of 0.7% of their gross national income on ‘official development assistance’.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a serious setback for sustainable development. Had the SDGs been heeded sooner, control today would be faster and more effective. SDG 3.d calls for “early warning, risk reduction and management of national and global health risks”, which many countries, including wealthy ones, have overlooked. The SDGs provide an inclusive framework for post-COVID-19 economic recovery, and for development decoupled from negative environmental impacts (<http://sdgindex.org/>).

Rather than abandoning goals that reflect basic human rights and ignoring the need to respect Earth’s planetary boundaries, experts should uphold the SDGs and speak truth to power about what is needed to achieve them.

Jeffrey Sachs, Guido Schmidt-Traub, Guillaume Lafortune
UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, Paris, France.
guido.schmidt-traub@unsdsn.org

SDGs: aggregate to fix prioritization

The COVID-19 pandemic hinders achievement of some of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs; see *Nature* 583, 331–332; 2020), but it has revealed the greater importance of those related to health and safety. I agree that considering them equally important might be unrealistic (R. Naidoo and B. Fisher *Nature* 583, 198–201; 2020). An aggregated approach would allow for trade-offs between and prioritization of different goals.

Existing frameworks for a single outcome – such as normalizing scores across countries – can be simplistic and lack ethical underpinnings (T. Schaubroeck *et al. Environ. Sci. Technol.* 54, 2051–2053; 2020). A better way to assess sustainable development, dealing with human needs, would be to use well-being as the end goal.

The original SDGs could be complemented by a flexible aggregated approach that can be applied differently in various scenarios, such as lockdowns versus no lockdowns.

Thomas Schaubroeck Luxembourg Institute of Science and Technology, Belvaux, Luxembourg.
thomas.schaubroeck@list.lu

SDGs: a North Star to guide us through this dark time

In a multipronged global crisis, now is not the time to reconsider the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs; *Nature* 583, 331–332; 2020). The COVID-19 crisis stems from exactly the type of interconnected failure that the SDGs aim to address. This moment requires absolute clarity while we continue to fight for the world that we need.

Although many SDGs might now seem harder to achieve, the pandemic is not a reason to scale them back. On the contrary, it reinforces why the goals were established in the first place: to chart a better course towards common economic, social and environmental ambitions that will guarantee humanity’s long-term future. COVID-19 does not alter the need to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions or ocean acidification. Nor does it mitigate the need to end pointless deaths and persistent inequities.

In 2015, the SDGs emerged from a painstaking 3-year diplomatic negotiation among 193 countries. Amid current geopolitical tensions, it is unlikely that all these countries could reach a better consensus today – on this or any topic. Whatever their imperfections, the SDGs are a ‘North Star’ to help us to rebuild after today’s crisis.

Amar Bhattacharya, Homi Kharas, John W. McArthur*
Brookings Institution,
Washington DC, USA.
jmcarthur@brookings.edu

*Declares non-financial competing interests; see go.nature.com/2xvgy0x