



THE OPINION PAGES | OP-ED CONTRIBUTORS

How to Prioritize U.N. Goals

By ABHIJIT BANERJEE and VARAD PANDE SEPT. 10, 2014

Cambridge, Mass. — In France, children grow up hearing the story of the 100 times good cake: A cat and a dog preparing a cake start from the idea that if the cake has 100 delicious ingredients, it will be “100 times good.” So they make a cake with strawberries and cream, garlic and pepper (and throw in a mouse and some bones for good measure) — with predictable consequences.

Diplomats are facing a “100 times good” temptation as they work to establish new United Nations global objectives for development, known as Sustainable Development Goals, that will help set an overarching narrative for the world’s progress for the next 15 years.

The diplomats from 70 countries made up an Open Working Group, which recently submitted its proposal. A diplomat from a small Pacific island that faces imminent inundation might, understandably, have focused on the elimination of fossil-fuel subsidies, while one from China or India might have stressed the transfer of environmentally sound technologies to developing countries on favorable terms. By themselves, these are both worthy causes, but a result of accommodating these divergent priorities is a list with 17 goals and 169 targets as metrics for measuring progress toward those goals — a sort of “169 times good cake.”

The previous Millennium Development Goals, established in 2000 with a target date of 2015, set only eight broad goals — like universal primary education, gender equality and environmental sustainability — as priorities for global resources, and just 19 targets.

The power of the original millennium goals came from their very clear prioritization of a small number of measurable objectives. The idea was to present to the world a specific vision that said, “This much at least we should be able to offer every human being.” By emphasizing the sheer modesty of what was being proposed, it made it hard for nation states to ignore the global project.

What is needed now is a clear, concise set of objectives. Without them, the entire project is in very real danger of failing. If nations can simply ignore the imperatives on the grounds that they are too many, too grandiose and too far out of touch with countries’ limited resources and ability to effect change, the development goals will just be another pious hope in the long list of United Nations-sponsored fantasies.

We have some experience of just how difficult choosing priorities can be. We were both involved in the High-Level Panel for the Post-2015 Development Agenda, a group set up by the secretary general that worked in parallel to the Open Working Group. We submitted our report — which will be combined with the Open Working Group’s — in May last year, and despite our attempts to discipline ourselves ruthlessly, we ended up with 12 goals and 54 targets.

Choices have to be made. Some are easier than others: For example, “Devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism” (Target 8.9 in the diplomats’ proposal), laudable as it is as an objective, cannot possibly lay the same claim to our attention as infant mortality or mass illiteracy.

The list of targets could also be shortened by focusing on outcomes and leaving out process or input measures (the current version has both). This has the added advantage of allowing countries to use their limited resources as they see fit. For example, we think it is much better to have a quantitative target for children’s learning (e.g., by 2030, X percent of children should be reading or doing math at their grade level) than to require them to “increase by X percent the supply of qualified teachers” (Target 4.c in the working group proposal), especially given the lack of evidence that teacher training as currently delivered has much effect on children’s learning.

Moreover, the goals and targets should be as specific, measurable and actionable as possible. For example, Target 12.2 in the proposal asks countries to “by 2030 achieve sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources.” Who would argue with that, but what does it actually require countries to do other than to say amen?

Finally, our report indicated some issues that apply to many goals. Inequality was one. The idea was that for a range of goals, countries would have to measure and report the outcomes — for example, infant mortality — for the poorest X percent (say, 20 percent) of the population, in addition to the average.

This is where we find a lot of the historically disadvantaged populations (the Roma in Europe, “scheduled tribes,” as the indigenous people in India are known, African-Americans) and help bring some attention to subpopulations without focusing on ethnicity directly.

It also makes it harder for countries to concentrate just on people close to the poverty line and ignore those far below and points to overlooked communities in the richest countries.

The United Nations General Assembly has its work cut out. It must balance ambition with practicality. It must devise a tight agenda for the world to collectively strive toward — and remember that more ingredients do not always make the best cake.

Abhijit Banerjee is the international professor of economics at M.I.T. Varad Pande is a sustainability science fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School.

A version of this op-ed appears in print on September 11, 2014, in The International New York Times.