


The Sustainable Development Goals should be reset to prioritize poverty, health and climate

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 Check for updates

The UN SDGs will only improve human health if they are accompanied by systemic change that addresses global power imbalances.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were born at the United Nations (UN) Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro in 2012. The objective of the conference was to produce a set of universal goals that meet the urgent environmental, political and economic challenges facing the world. By September 2015, all UN member states had adopted ‘Transforming the World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’ and the associated 17 SDGs.

In this time of polycrisis, where global crises occur simultaneously, any renewed SDGs need to be courageous, bold and reflective. SDG targets can only be met through deliberative steps for systemic change¹ that rebalance power and address underlying inequities. Fundamental transformation in leadership, institutions and nations is needed for a flourishing, healthy and safe future for all, not just the privileged few.

The world has changed since 2015

The central aim of the SDG 2030 process was to guide joint global efforts toward a more sustainable and equitable future by focusing on the ‘5 Ps’: people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership. The bar was set high: the SDGs would have to be universal, integrated and transformative. They would cover all nations and the entire sustainability agenda. They would be supported by countries at the highest levels, including UN organizations, financial institutions, civil society and the private sector. The process was the UN’s first big effort at multi-stakeholder diplomacy—an attempt at demonstrating UN relevance and the ability of its agencies to coordinate implementation in an increasingly fragmented world. 2015 was a moment in time when policy makers were willing to consider inter-related issues, but our world now looks very different.

The Secretary General of the UN has called for a ‘rescue operation’ at the SDG Summit in September 2023 and the UN Summit for the Future in 2024. This salvage operation is not only for the SDGs, but for the international order and the values that the UN represents, as both funding and political will have fallen short. The [UN Sustainable Development Report](#) states that the achievement of the SDGs are “in deep trouble” and only 15% of the 140 targets are on track. No strong group of leaders has come forward to produce an integrative and universal SDG agenda; indeed, finding an agreement on a joint SDG declaration from the September 2023 Summit is proving to be very difficult.

The health goals are particularly off track, yet the health negotiations being conducted at the UN in September 2023 at three high-level health meetings related to SDG 3 – on targets 3.3, tuberculosis (infectious diseases), 3.8, universal health coverage, and 3.d, emergency preparedness – reflect the same lack of enthusiasm. This is in part because the COVID-19 pandemic has taken over as a fresh crisis, but



also because there is no determined commitment to improve health, support sexual and reproductive health and rights, build health systems and increase health security. There is also no united, strong and determined movement to call out these gaps.

The health uncertainty complex

It is not clear that a rescue operation for the SDGs would improve global health. The most recent [Human Development Report](#) suggests that the world has changed too much to continue with the SDGs as they are. It proposes that the world is caught in a new ‘uncertainty complex’ with “acute crises giving way to chronic, layered, interacting uncertainties at a global scale, painting a picture of uncertain times and unsettled lives”. The report describes the world as being caught in three volatile crosscurrents (Fig. 1): the dangerous planetary changes of the Anthropocene, including climate change; the pursuit of sweeping societal transformations on par with the Industrial Revolution; and the vagaries and vacillations of polarized societies. COVID-19 has shown the extent to which health has become an integral dimension, and sometimes driver, of this uncertainty complex, becoming highly politicized in the process. This health uncertainty demands new approaches, but the political system does not seem to be ready for them.

The Ebola outbreak that hit three West African states in 2014 and was still raging during the SDG negotiations in 2015 was a foreshadowing

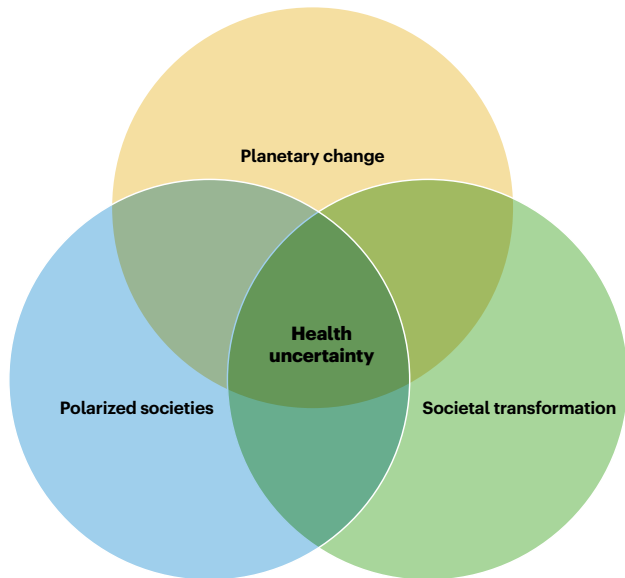


Fig. 1 | An era of health uncertainty. Planetary change, including climate change, increasingly polarized societies, and a level of societal transformation not seen since the industrial revolution are all contributing to an increase in global health uncertainty.

of the health uncertainty that was to come. During the High-Level Meeting on universal health coverage in New York in September 2019, the [Global Preparedness Monitoring Board issued its first report](#), “A World at Risk”². This warned of the high probability of a pandemic, but did not spark much interest, despite the inclusion of ‘global health risks’ in Target 3.d of SDG 3. SARS-CoV-2 struck the world just 3 months later. The virus could only have such a drastic impact because of persisting inequalities³, corporate greed, ongoing social polarizations, lack of global solidarity and lack of progress on universal health coverage. The COVID-19 pandemic led to the realization that a health crisis can [easily become a polycrisis](#) “where disparate crises interact such that the overall impact far exceeds the sum of each part”.

Nobody expected that a pandemic, with its many repercussions, would stop SDG progress in its tracks. But even more, nobody would have envisaged that so little would be done to ensure that a similar tragedy would not strike again. In a period of uncertainty, defined by the ongoing polycrisis, the adjustment of individual SDG targets is not enough. Dysfunctionalities should be used productively to create new systems. To move forward with real change, four issues that have troubled the SDGs, below, need to be addressed (Box 1).

Promote the well-being economy

First, the central constructional flaw of the SDGs must be addressed: the equation of prosperity with growth in gross domestic product (GDP) and the ensuing neglect of equity. A new value-based narrative will be essential, such as that presented by proponents of a well-being economy and the [World Health Organization \(WHO\) Council on the Economics of Health for All](#). The SDGs were constructed assuming unjustifiable certainty in relation to the continuation of existing models of growth and development, the positive dynamics of globalization and economic liberalization, the functioning and acceptance of the existing multilateral order, and the hegemony of the global north.

BOX 1

Four steps to reform the SDGs

1. Promote the wellbeing economy.
2. Recognize power inequalities.
3. Prioritize planetary health.
4. Reform global financing.

The SDGs do not adequately address the underlying systemic inequities and uncertainties that perpetuate poverty, inequality, climate disasters and health disparities. Structural factors such as wealth distribution, trade regimes, social determinants of health, food price speculation, gender discrimination and economic inequalities must be addressed. There is a lack of fiscal space for investing in health, including intellectual property, lack of access to medicines, lack of technology sharing and inequitable distribution of production sites. The wellbeing of people and the planet should be addressed in a coordinated fashion through approaches such as One Health and Planetary Health.

Recognize power inequalities

Second, development for some is based on the destruction of the livelihoods of others. Metrics for sustainable development must therefore reflect power relations and inequity. High-income countries often have [the highest SDG index scores](#), despite being some of the most environmentally unsustainable countries.

High-income countries offshore polluting industries to countries in the global south, cause deforestation and overfishing through over-consumption, steal land and futures from Indigenous communities and extract data from lower-income countries. As a result, [poorer countries are punished in the SDG index](#) for being harmed and polluted by richer countries. A metric must be developed that reflects these imbalances.

Prioritize planetary health

Third, the SDGs were built on the assumption that the world has 15 years’ time to achieve progress. In 2023, the conditions for life that the SDGs assumes exist can no longer be taken for granted; the habitability of our planet is at stake. More work must be done to tackle the causes of climate change, a major risk factor for health.

In 2015 countries were negotiating the UN Climate Change Conference (COP21) in Paris, in parallel to the SDGs. The Paris Agreement, a legally binding international treaty on climate change, was adopted by 196 parties in December 2015, with a goal of limiting the temperature increase to 1.5 °C above preindustrial levels. Here, too, progress has stalled, and the world has warmed considerably in recent years. The World Meteorological Organization is sounding the alarm that “the world will breach the 1.5 °C level on a temporary basis with increasing frequency”. Failure to meet the Paris Agreement will have major impacts on health, especially in the world’s poorest countries.

Reform global financing

Fourth, sustainable development should address poverty, health and climate and must be led by those who have most at stake. Poverty, health and climate are three interlinking ‘concrete universals’ that, if addressed, will deliver the strongest results, based on a value-based

economic model. Their prioritization is supported by an alliance of [countries that want to improve livability for their populations](#).

Fixing poverty, health and climate will require substantial funding and reforms to the global financial system. Much of this is captured in the [2022 Bridgetown Agenda for the Reform of the Global Financial Architecture](#). This states that “we must lay the path for a new financial system that drives financial resources towards climate action and the SDGs”. Such reforms would include provision of emergency liquidity, expansion of multilateral lending to governments, and new multilateral mechanisms for financing mitigation and reconstruction. These financing reforms were part of the proposals for the SDG declaration (and partly in the WHO pandemic accord) but have been stopped by the USA, the UK and their allies to [maintain the primacy of the Bretton Woods Organizations](#): the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (the third being the World Trade Organization). This is despite the UN Secretary General describing these institutions as ‘outdated’, ‘dysfunctional’ and ‘unfair’ and reflecting the power relations of 1945 at a press conference on occasion of the G7 meeting in Hiroshima in May of this year.

Political fragmentation

Implementation of the goals demands “an absolute transformation, not reform”, according to [the Bridgetown Initiative](#), but political will for this is lacking. The inclusive approach of the UN, with one country having one vote, does provide low- and middle-income countries with symbolic equality but does not address the hegemony of the high-income countries.

That is why instead of investing in a global alliance, many countries are investing in regional orders, flexible alliances and mini-lateralism, using their local and regional knowledge and expertise instead of deferring to international institutions in Geneva or New York. This fragmentation can hinder global efforts to achieve the SDGs, as it creates barriers to collaboration, information sharing and coordinated action.

The negotiations at the WHO to craft a historic pandemic accord following the COVID-19 pandemic shows these fault lines. When equity was positioned in the forefront, there was a backlash from the global north. And when values such as human rights and sexual and reproductive health and rights are proposed in policy documents and declarations, it leads to a backlash from many countries in the global south. This polarization can only be overcome by facing and addressing the

systemic issues that perpetuate divisions and by bridging divides to foster a sense of global solidarity and multilateral cooperation. However, the world lacks a strong group of leaders for such an agenda. The difficulties encountered in drafting the political declaration from the SDG summit, the WHO pandemic accord, the Group of 20 health declarations and the UN high-level meeting declarations all demonstrate the same tendency to avoid transformative approaches and instead pitch for the least ambitious wording.

The future of the SDGs must be considered in the context of this global uncertainty and polycrisis. Member States will need to refocus on how best to advance a global agenda at the Summit of the Future in 2024. In the meantime, a broad range of stakeholders must work on a bold and audacious approach, which begins by challenging the wider global development frameworks that have driven the SDGs. Structures and processes must be changed to rebalance power and address underlying issues of inequity which divide the world, including differentiating between the world we live in and the world we live off⁴.

The SDGs can be deconstructed to rebuild collective goals with transformed principles and perceptions as critical cornerstones. Such goals can bend to withstand the polycrisis-induced winds of change which buffet the world. Our world is burning, and only transformative action can fundamentally address the existential global crisis that humanity faces.

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.