Speaking Truth to Power about the SDGs

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Abstract

Recent calls to change the SDGs and to lower ambition confuse two issues. The first is whether goals, such as universal access to healthcare, education, safe water, and clean energy, are achievable by 2030, which includes issues of technical and operational feasibility as well as affordability. The second is whether such goals are likely to be achieved given the failure rich countries to honor the goal of international partnership (SDG 17) as well as other failures in international cooperation and in domestic governance of many countries. We argue that the goals are achievable and affordable. Covid-19 is a setback for the SDGs but does not put the goals out of reach. Indeed, the SDGs provide a framework for recovery from the pandemic. In view of the technical feasibility of the SDGs, experts and scientists should speak "truth to power" about what needs to be done to achieve the SDGs instead of calling for lower ambition.

Note

This Working Paper is an expanded version of a Correspondence published in *Nature* [1] in response to a *Nature* editorial [2].

About the SDSN

The UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) mobilizes scientific and technical expertise from academia, civil society, and the private sector to support practical problem solving for sustainable development at local, national, and global scales. The SDSN has been operating since 2012 under the auspices of the UN Secretary-General. The SDSN is building national and regional networks of knowledge institutions, solution-focused thematic networks, and the SDG Academy, an online university for sustainable development.

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Recent calls to change the SDGs [2,3] confuse two issues. The first is whether goals, such as universal access to healthcare, education, safe water, and clean energy, are achievable by 2030, which includes issues of technical and operational feasibility as well as affordability. The second is whether such goals are likely to be achieved given the chronic failure of the United States and many other rich countries to honor the goal of international partnership (SDG 17) as well as other failures in international cooperation and in domestic governance of many countries.

The correct answer is that the goals are achievable but unlikely to be achieved, particularly given the politics of the rich countries and of major countries to join in an internationally coordinated response. Experts should therefore speak truth to power about the SDGs rather than abandon goals that reflect basic human rights and the need for humanity to respect the Earth's planetary boundaries [4].

The SDGs are achievable

The SDGs can be achieved through a combination of policies, including increased public transfers to the poor to alleviate poverty (SDG 1), increased public outlays for social services including healthcare (SDG 3) and education (SDG 4), and increased public and private investments in core infrastructure, including water and sanitation (SDG 6), electrification using renewable energy (SDG 7), and biodiversity conservation (SDG 14 and 15). The recent criticisms of the SDGs have not demonstrated technological or other operational obstacles to achieving the SDGs objectives, and for good reason. In areas including energy decarbonization [5–7], sustainable land-use and food systems [8–10], education [11], disease control [12,13], and others, academic studies, commission reports, and policy analyses suggest pathways to success.

The goals are also affordable. Numerous assessments, including by the IMF [14], the SDSN [15,16], and many others [17,18] confirm that the SDGs can be financed at the cost of around 2 percent of global output with some 0.4 percent needed to fill financing gaps in the poorest countries. These investment volumes are affordable, particularly given the high social, economic, and environmental benefits from meeting the SDGs. Governments are currently spending vastly greater sums on responses to Covid-19 [19,20].

Ambitious goals, if assiduously and creatively pursued, can unleash human innovation to accelerate progress beyond previously imaginable rates. This has been demonstrated since 2001 by advances in controlling HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, including in some of the poorest countries and conflict zones. This success was widely deemed to be infeasible at the time when G7 countries were first asked to commit resources to the task [21,22]. Many experts disparaged the ambition, and key technologies that enabled the control of the diseases (long-lasting insecticide-treated bednets, artemisinin-based combination therapy for malaria, treatment for multi-drug resistant TB, rapid diagnostic test for malaria, inexpensive anti-retroviral therapy, etc.) were not yet developed or in widespread use when the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria was launched in 2001 [22]. Their development and dissemination was organized by countless partners who coalesced around shared goals that were just as ambitious as the SDGs are today [23]. Increased investments

in health helped reduce the cost of key medical supplies [24,25], thus making the ambitious goals easier to reach.

Back in the early 2000s then many pundits argued against the ambition of the health goals lest they "discourage countries", but fortunately this was not borne out, and in a few short years countries developed "quality demand" for national healthcare strategies backed up by new technologies and rigorous monitoring [26]. The critical importance of ambitious goals in achieving these results has been widely documented [27,28].

In every SDG area we see tremendous opportunities for innovation that can accelerate the scaling-up and reduce costs further. In healthcare, for example, community health workers deployed with smartphones greatly extend the reach of primary health systems at very low cost [29]; telemedicine, rapid diagnostic tests, and electronic medical records, further improve the scalability of core health services [30]. Remote sensing and new forms of data offer unprecedented opportunities for monitoring and improving the management of ecosystems [31]. Reductions in the cost of renewable power have consistently outpaced expectations [7,32], so it is becoming easier to decarbonize energy systems.

Today, the world has technical analyses showing how the SDGs can be achieved – just like it did for health in 2001 [33]. The real issue is not the achievability of ambitious goals, but the need to take the goals seriously, get organized to achieve them, embark on intensified problem solving, and mobilize the resources needed for their achievement. We underscore the need for resource mobilization, including international financing. Without it intensive problem solving and the scaling-up of proven interventions in low-income settings become impossible.

The SDGs: A roadmap for the recovery from Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic is obviously a very serious setback for the SDGs. Rich and poor countries suffer from a global economic downturn coupled with their own health and social emergencies resulting from the pandemic. Fortunately, Covid-19 is controllable through effective public health interventions, most at low cost. These include face masks, testing and contact tracing, public quarantining and isolating of those who are infectious, and bans on large public gathering. If the SDGs had been heeded earlier, 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," but many countries, including rich countries, overlooked the target. Many low-income countries, notably those in ASEAN including Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Vietnam, have so far successfully suppressed the epidemic at low cost.

The SDGs provide a framework for recovery from Covid-19 [34]. They are a roadmap for decoupling economic development from negative environmental impacts with a strong focus on infrastructure investments that boost jobs and underpin the transition to a low-carbon economy, in line with the Paris Agreement. Aggregate demand, income and trade will remain disrupted for many months, and therefore investment will be the main source of economic growth and job creation. Tens of millions of jobs can be created directly by building new clean-energy systems based on solar and wind energy, long-distance power

transmission, smart grids, electric vehicles, hydrogen and other synthetic fuels, and energy-efficient buildings. As we have argued elsewhere [34], SDG implementation and Covid-19 recovery can be organized around six SDG Transformations [35] (Figure 1).

Figure 1 | Six SDG Transformations

Source: Sachs et al. [36]

Some countries are using the SDGs to inform their Covid-19 recovery plans. It is the case for instance of the EU Covid-19 Recovery Package "Investing in a green, digital and resilient EU" [37]. The €750 billion plan emphasizes the need to "tackle climate change in line with the Union's commitments to implement the Paris Agreement and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals". Some 30% of the recovery package has been ringfenced for spending on the green and digital transitions.

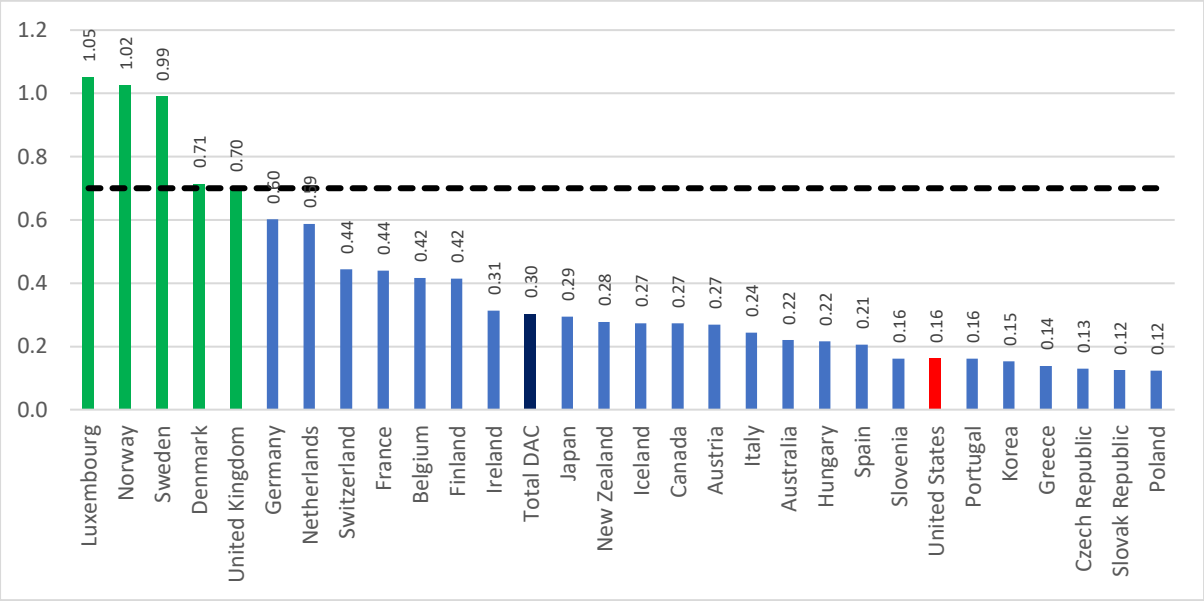
The need for international leadership and financing for the SDGs

Yet, the global distribution of income and power are stacked against achieving the SDGs. Most rich countries do not want to share their income, even up to the minimal target of 0.7 percent of GDP. The richest individuals in the world, roughly 2,000 billionaires, have wealth on the order of $10 trillion, but many of them do not share their wealth to support the SDGs. The world's richest individual, Jeffrey Bezos of Amazon, has a net worth of $190 billion. If this sum were spent down over 10 years, assuming a modest return of 5 percent

per annum, the annual spending would amount to $23 billion. According to UNESCO estimates [38] this is nearly sufficient to ensure the financing of primary and secondary education for every child in Africa. Fair taxation of the wealthy, curbing tax evasion by companies [39], and other tax revenues can mobilize the 2% of world gross product to achieve the SDGs, including the 0.4% in transfers to the poorest countries.

We should also face the crucial reality regarding the United States, an important country for global SDG achievement. The Trump Administration has consistently argued for budget cuts in development aid though U.S. Official Development Aid is now just 0.16 percent of GDP [40], less than one-fourth of the 0.7 percent target (Figure 2). It has pulled out of UNESCO, the WHO, and the Paris Climate Agreement. It insisted on cuts in the core UN budget and has resisted multilateral efforts at tax reform.

Figure 2 | Official Development Assistance (ODA), grant equivalent as percent of GNI (2019)



Note: In green, countries that have achieved the SDG Target of 0.7%.
Source: OECD DAC [40]

Concluding remarks

Assertions that the SDGs are impossible to achieve are naïve at best and claims of a reactionary status quo at worst. They really assert that we cannot and even should not try to reform global international financing in order to get the 261 million children out of school as of 2019 into a classroom; or to save the 5 million children under the age of 5 dying each year of preventable and treatable causes [41]; or to tackle the existential crisis of climate change and other environmental degradation. These are bad political choices, not matters of possibility.

Advocates of lower ambition often point to a few corrupt countries or projects as “proof” that rapid progress is impossible. We concur that poor governance can make sustainable development impossible, but for every case of mismanagement there are many others

where the will and systems are in place to achieve remarkable results if the financial resources and other support are made available. And success inspires success as well as reforms elsewhere. This is how the health sector managed to tackle seemingly impossible problems of lack of political will to talk about the diseases, poor or non-existent health systems, widespread discrimination against people living with the diseases, corrupt and inefficient health systems, and so forth. Yet, with the help of ambitious goals these challenges were identified, tackled, and addressed in country after country.

Others call for lowering the ambition of the SDGs to save poor countries from the stigma of failure. Yet, there is no shame in failing to achieve these objectives by 2030 if countries are doing their best under the circumstances, but face a lack of interest, financing, and help from rich countries.

There is another danger, which recent critiques of the SDGs fail to acknowledge. The 2030 Agenda was a rare diplomatic triumph in a fragmented world. Since then global politics has fractured further, making it impossible to agree in the near future on a new set of goals. Undoing the SDGs would leave the world without shared objectives. In our view it is vastly wiser to focus on achieving the SDGs, including by promoting innovation and needed financing, than to embark on a new goal-setting process.

The question therefore is this: Should the world abandon or weaken time-bound SDGs that are technically feasible and affordable because those who can do not will the means? We urge all who are in favor of human rights and environmental sustainability to redouble our efforts to harness the energy, resources, and public policies to achieve “the future we want” that the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs lay out [42].

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