

YES



GARY RYNHART

Gary Rynhart has worked with and in the UN system for nearly 20 years. Working for the International Labour Organization (ILO), he has been based in Geneva, Beirut, Bangkok and Pretoria. He currently lives in South Africa. He is the author of *Colouring the Future: Why the United Nations plan to end poverty and wars is working* (Catapult Books, 2020, nin.tl/colouringthefuture).

COULD THE SDGS DELIVER ON THEIR PROMISES?

We are a third of the way towards 2030, target date for the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Gary Rynhart and Jan Vandemoortele differ over how likely the Goals are to be achieved.

GARY: The SDGs cover a huge number of seemingly intractable issues. What might surprise many people is that there is a good chance they will succeed. There are six reasons to be optimistic. First, the fact that 191 countries actually agreed the SDGs is in itself somewhat astonishing. Anybody familiar with how international negotiations are conducted will testify to that.

Second, the SDGs are mobilizing all development organizations around the Goals. In the past, funds to support poverty reduction or other social or health objectives were more scattered and driven by the individual donors' priorities.

Third, the role of the private sector is central to efforts to achieve the Goals – which was not the case in the past. Fourth, this is a time of massive technological innovation, when technology is speeding up and transforming the development process.

Fifth, generational change. Survey after survey shows that firms offering millennial employees a compelling vision related to advancing a social or environmental issue will get traction. There is increasingly an expectation on business that it should play a wider social role. This is feeding into the calculus of companies and changing corporate behaviour.

Finally, a big difference between this effort to end the big global problems and previous attempts is the unrelenting focus on measuring and reporting progress.

JAN: The chance the SDGs will succeed is nil. There are six reasons to keep a sense of realism. First, a recent assessment by the European Commission claimed that European countries lead globally on the SDGs, but had to add that none are on track to achieve the Goals by 2030. In other words, even those in the lead lag behind!

Second, the SDGs are not really mobilizing people or communities, mostly because of their complex nature. Journalists, teachers and preachers seldom mention them; civil society hardly uses them to keep government accountable, as was the case with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Third, the private sector has engaged with the SDGs, yet it remains an open question whether this will foster progress. Fourth, the belief in techno-fixes is widespread, but development is foremost about transformation. Reducing maternal mortality, for example, is as much about changing attitudes vis-à-vis women as providing adequate healthcare.

Fifth, the evidence that corporate behaviour has fundamentally changed is slim, while examples of continued misbehaviour are rife. The SDGs have not changed the logic of the big players, who tend to put profits before people and planet. Governments that approved the SDGs have by and large stuck to business as usual too.

Finally, the SDGs mostly consist of fuzzy and woolly targets that cannot be objectively verified.

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JAN VANDEMOORTELE

Jan Vandemoortele served in various capacities with the United Nations (UNICEF, UNDP, ILO) for over 30 years, both in the field and at headquarters. He was the co-architect of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and is a critical friend of the SDGs. He lives in Bruges, Belgium.

GARY: One of the reasons there is such pessimism about the SDGs is the wider narrative that things are terrible. It has become increasingly common to read doom-laden articles on the state of modern society in the media. Extreme poverty on the increase. Wars and famine everywhere. The end of democracy and so on.

It is an embedded narrative. However, it is simply not true.

The world is actually more peaceful than at any time. The number of conflicts between countries is at its lowest. The world is richer than ever before. And fewer people are living in extreme poverty. These are all indisputable facts.

Much of this can be attributed to the concerted efforts by the UN over the past 20 years to develop a consensus on how to tackle the big issues of our time – wars, poverty, famine and disease – and to measure the impact of those efforts. The MDGs more than halved the number of people suffering from hunger; massively expanded universal primary education; reduced the child mortality rate by more than half; and halved the global maternal mortality ratio.

What the MDGs did and the SDGs are now doing was create a well-signposted roadmap that outlines 'what success looks like' and that all development actors can support.

JAN: So-called indisputable facts can be subjective. Agreed, survival, nutrition and education have improved globally. But if this era is relatively peaceful, why is the number of displaced people in the world at record highs?

Regarding extreme poverty, I wish the narrative were true. But it has more to do with 'repetition bias' than with reality. The truth is that a dollar a day doesn't keep poverty away, as the World Bank statistics want us to believe.

Psychologist Daniel Kahneman explains that

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a 'reliable way to make people believe in falsehoods is frequent repetition'. Thus beware of 'facts by repetition'.

And what about massive inequality? Evidence shows that high inequality exerts an inordinate and harmful influence on the way we feel, think, behave and relate to each other. People who feel poor have as many years from their life subtracted as those who are poor. Why do so many people, even in rich countries, feel part of the precariat, despite unprecedented global wealth?

Aggregate statistics may be useful to paint an optimistic picture of the world, but they overgeneralize and oversimplify reality. At best, they tell part of the story; at worst, they mislead us.

No, this is not simply that you see the glass as half full and I see it as half empty. I am not a disciple of Schopenhauer, the philosopher whose pessimism was legendary, but rather cautioned by Kierkegaard's concept of 'subjective truth'.

GARY: A key reason to be hopeful that the SDGs can be achieved is generational change. According to Global Shapers (the most recent data from this worldwide survey are from 2017), whether directly or indirectly, in relation to the SDGs 82 per cent of the young people surveyed claim to take a role in achieving them.

The fact that not all respondents know what the SDGs are (some 45 per cent) means the UN has lots more to do to communicate them. But it's indicative of the way young people view the big issues.

Take the emotive topic of refugees. To the proposed statement 'I would welcome refugees in...' most respondents answered 'my country', 'my neighbourhood' and 'my city', while over one-quarter indicated 'my home'!

According to a Deloitte 2019 survey more Millennials and Gen Zers say they want to 'make a positive impact on