

The Sustainable Development Goals-The Road Ahead

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With the onset of 2016, the sun has finally set on Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and a new set of universal goals, targets and indicators known as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that the 193 UN (United Nations) member states have endorsed. The SDGs follow and expand on the MDGs which were agreed upon by the governments in 2000. In July 2014, open working group on SDGs proposed 17 goals with 169 targets covering a broad range of SDGs (1). The goals were endorsed by resolution at the UN Sustainable Development Summit in September 2015. The SDGs for health provide a roadmap of what a caring society must aim to achieve over next 15 years for its people.

In contrast to MDGs, the UN this time before implementing SDGs conducted the largest consultation programme in its history to gauge public opinion on what the SDGs should include. Alongside the open working group, which involved over 90 nations, it conducted a series of global conversations, which included 11 thematic and 83 national consultations, besides door to door surveys. It also launched an online My World Survey asking people to prioritise the areas they would like to see addressed in the goals. The results of the consultations fed into the working group's discussions. It published its final draft with its 17 suggestions in July 2014.

The legacy of MDGs: In September 2000, the UN General Assembly adopted the Millennium Declaration, establishing a global partnership of countries and development partners committed to eight voluntary development goals, to be achieved by 2015. Representing ambitious moral and practical commitments, the MDGs (2) called for action to: (1) eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; (2) achieve universal primary education; (3) promote gender equality and empower women; (4) reduce child mortality; (5) improve maternal health; (6) combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; (7) ensure environmental sustainability; and (8) develop a global partnership for development. Three of the eight MDGs are focused on health, while health is also a component of several other MDGs (nutrition, water and sanitation) (3). Strengths of MDGs were encouraging donor governments, international agencies and country decision-

makers to focus attention on areas of need, and to measure the results of initiatives undertaken. The emphasis on measuring results and increased monitoring highlighted the importance of accountability involving a cyclical process of monitoring, review and remedial action.(4)

Learning from limitations of MDGs: Although a continuation of MDGs, SDGs add to the lessons learnt from them and also taking along the unfinished agenda of MDGs to address challenges of equity, inclusiveness and urbanization. While poverty eradication, health, education, and food security and nutrition remain priorities, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) comprise a broad range of economic, social and environmental objectives, and offer the prospect of more peaceful and inclusive societies.(5) SDGs are in fact clear, concise, time bound and measurable while the MDGs were set to get us half-way to the different goals, the SDGs have been designed to finish the job. Several limitations of the MDGs have also become apparent, including a limited focus, resulting in verticalization of health and disease programmes in countries, a lack of attention to strengthening health systems, the emphasis on a "one-size-fits-all" development planning approach, and a focus on aggregate targets rather than equity.(5) SDGs, unlike MDGs, are applicable to all the nations and are more comprehensive than MDGs. The 17 goals of SDGs can broadly be categorized as (6):

1. The first 7 goals are extension of MDGs. Gender equality has prominently featured among other gender concerns to be integrated with the goals.

2. Goals 8-10 include jobs, infrastructure, industrialization etc. which together comprise inclusiveness.

3. The last seven goals cover sustainability and urbanization.

One of the 17 goals has been devoted specifically to health, and is framed in deliberately broad terms that are relevant to all countries and all populations: "Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages". The health goal is associated with 13 targets, including four means of implementation targets labeled 3.a to 3.d.

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SDGs and India: As far as India is concerned regarding SDGs, the overarching focus on eradicating poverty and hunger is in sync with priorities of the Indian government. The inclusion of standalone goal on sustainable consumption patterns is a major advance on international co-operation on environment. Regarding the progress of India in MDGs, the results have been mixed. The under five mortality has dropped to 48 which is still above the world average of 43. Infant mortality rate and Neo-natal mortality rate have come to 38 and 28 from 88 and 57, respectively.(7) Maternal mortality rate at 167(2011-13) is well above the average of 109.(8) Although the target of safe drinking water has been achieved, yet the target of sanitation is likely to be missed in the rural areas.(9) Despite their pro-poor focus, the MDGs have, glossed over within-country inequalities. This is because of employing almost exclusively aggregate targets and indicators; hence, undermining efforts are required to improve conditions for the poorest and hardest-to-reach populations.(10, 11)

Legacy of MDGs taken forward in SDGs: The MDG goals on maternal mortality, child mortality and infectious diseases have been retained in the SDG framework, augmented by new and more ambitious targets for 2030, and expanded to include neonatal mortality and more infectious diseases such as hepatitis and waterborne diseases. The targets on access to sexual and reproductive health-care services and access to vaccines and medicines are also closely related to the MDG targets. Sexual and reproductive rights are addressed under MDG 5 on gender equality. The SDGs include new targets on NCDs and mental health, substance abuse, injuries, health impact from hazardous chemicals, water and soil pollution and contamination and the implementation of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC). Universal Health Coverage (UHC) is also a new target, which provides an overall framework for the implementation of a broad and ambitious agenda in all countries. UHC is the only target that cuts across all targets of the health goals, as well as addresses linkages with health-related targets in the other goals.⁵

What more needs to be done?: For successful transition from MDGs to SDGs, we need-

1. Political will to adopt SDGs as one of the post-2015 development agenda,
2. International endorsement for financial resources, and
3. Technology facilitation mechanism to implement the agenda.

One of the strengths of the SDGs is the breadth of their embrace,(12) which seeks to encompass communicable diseases, NCDs and injuries as well as

determinants of health such as increasing urbanization, pollution and climate change. With the right mix of investment, innovation and integrity, India can plan to achieve SDGs though economic progress of the nation has clearly not been matched by improvements in health.

Equity across all the goals of SDG calls for establishment of UHC, founded on the principle of equal access to health without risk of financial hardship. A movement towards equity in health depends, at least in part, on strong health and health financing information systems that collect disaggregated data about all health areas and health expenditures. Disaggregated data enable policy-makers to identify vulnerable populations and direct resources accordingly.(5) India must raise its public financing on health to invigorate primary healthcare services, strengthen district hospitals and expand the health work force. Essential health services, procurement of drugs and provision of diagnostics must be within the reach of common man to reduce out of pocket expenses through a system of universal coverage.

A fine balance of economy, efficiency and equity can be achieved by health systems for universal health coverage. Health policy can contribute to sustainable development and poverty reduction if people have access to the information and services they need to promote and protect their health and are protected from catastrophic expenditure when they fall ill.(5) One major challenge for India will be to fund these goals. It is also important to estimate the budget required and to find out from where these funds will come.(13)

A broad framework has to be made with provision for context specific modifications. The health of people is not solely a health sector responsibility; it is also impacted by issues such as transport, agriculture, housing, trade and foreign policy. To address the multi-sectoral nature of health determinants requires the political will to engage the whole of government in health.(14) In this context, one of the key lessons learnt from MDGs was importance of national and local contexts.

Innovation calls for technology enabled community health workers to provide basic essential health services. ANMs armed with android tablets having an array of diagnostic tests and decision support systems being run in the state of Jammu and Kashmir is one such example of innovation. With the expansion of allied health professionals, a lot of young people especially females will be gainfully employed, in turn boosting both the economy as well as health services.

Challenges associated with SDGs: Tracking progress has been vital in maintaining momentum of the MDGs,

as well as in identifying areas requiring greater efforts. Monitoring the progress of the 17 SDGs and their 169 targets will be a challenge, given the sheer number of targets and indicators. Furthermore, some of the new goals and targets have little track record in terms of data and monitoring.(5) There is increasing interest in the accurate measurement of health, disability and well-being, especially given the context of ageing populations and the growing prominence of chronic diseases as causes of disability and premature mortality. If it could be measured reliably, healthy life expectancy would be a suitable single indicator that captures both mortality and years of life lived in less than good health (i.e. with a disability).(15) Challenges remain with regard to disease and disability measurement as compared to more accurate mortality measurements. The "promote well-being" component of the overall health SDG also presents an interesting monitoring challenge. Measurement of self-reported well-being shares many of problems encountered in the measurement of non-fatal health outcomes.(16, 17, 18)

The unfinished MDG agenda is reflected in the SDGs and has been enhanced to include new and more ambitious targets such as ending epidemics of HIV, TB and malaria and all preventable maternal and child deaths - all with a greater focus on equity.(19) A vision that values health as a societal imperative for accelerated, sustainable and equitable development is the need of the hour. Being the second most populous country in the world and all the SDGs being vital in Indian context, the nation's progress has a very decisive role in determining the global status.

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