

The Merry-go-round of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals

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Advocacy is a funny thing. If you feel strongly enough about a cause, as everyone in international development does these days, it is no longer enough to campaign for something simply for its own sake.

You have to establish the added value it offers to every other good cause that is clamoring for attention.

The domino effect of ... every move

This frenzy of demonstrating win-win-win...win connections is at its peak these days, with the United Nations having narrowed down their 'Post-2015' agenda (also known as 'Post-MDG' or 'Sustainable Development Goals'/SDG agenda) -if 'narrowed' is the right word to describe a collection of 17 goals and 169 targets. Its slate of global aspirations for the next 15 years covers everything from health to employment to trade to forests (see also Massimo Livi Bacci's [*The United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development*](#)).

The popular and academic media are also doing what they can to support the SDG project. So, all in all, those of us who care about a particular goal or target have many constituencies and platforms that we must appeal to for special status. But so do all those pesky promoters of other causes who have other priorities and other categories of disadvantaged populations to rescue or placate.

The 2000 Millenium Development Goals Project, with its less ambitious list of 10 goals and 60 targets, seems to have achieved some success; so this time around, the goals are more abundant and the pockets are deeper. But supply always creates its own demand, and time and money are scarce resources after a certain point, even for the international organizations, aid agencies and philanthropies committed to making our sad world a better place - which some might say is becoming increasingly sad, considering all the mindless violence around us.

How then does one get one's own pet cause on the table? The currently popular trend is to

demonstrate that one's goal of interest is crucial for the success of the other priorities that have been set by those in power. So good health, for example, must be high on the list not only because people like being healthy, but also because healthier people are more productive, have fewer children, are less violent, waste less water, treat their womenfolk better and travel more often to the small island states where tourism is the primary source of revenue and which the SDGs also seek to protect.

As for SDG 5, the one on gender equality: that one has even more tie-ups with the remaining 16 goals. Each of those 16 goals stands a much better chance of being met if every activity under it is disaggregated to focus specifically on the needs of females. Never mind if the proponents of these other goals are busy demonstrating on the other hand that investing in them will end up being very good for Goal 5.

Between cause and effect: priorities

Right now, the sun is shining on climate change. So, different groups are hard at work to prove that family planning services will slow down climate change; or that jobs for all will keep tempers as well as temperatures cool. And getting piped water into homes will literally mean a smaller ecological footprint because women will not trudge for miles to get water.

The only trouble is that the people pushing for a climate accord in Paris have reversed the causal chain: it is cutting emissions that will help women practice birth control, provide jobs for distrustful and disoriented young men, and reduce the cost of bringing clean water to homes.

Of course, most of these interconnections are intuitive - man does not live by bread alone. He needs air and babies and condoms and a nice school nearby, as well as a place to go for some fun work and a warm home to return to and rest his weary soul. Moreover, getting any one of these legitimate perks does make it easier to acquire and enjoy the others.

These connections may be unsurprising to the intelligent observer, but funders still have to decide on priorities: bread, clean air, energy-efficient light bulbs, or that shiny pair of slippers in the shop window down the street.

No wonder an expensive industry has now sprung up to increase attention on specific goals, and it does so by attaching a monetary value to all the other benefits that arise from subscribing to each of these goals. This quantification of interconnections tries to specify in dollars the *ROI* (or *Returns on Investment*) that will come from giving my particular cause its due. The hard work then is to find the best mix of analytical variables to maximize ROI and to show that my cause's ROIs are higher than yours. The work of the *Copenhagen Consensus* Group is perhaps the most visible face of this kind of quantification, but there are several others (such as the Guttmacher Institute's recent report, *Adding It Up*) that try to quantify the gains from investing in different SDG goals, and they make the case for what the World Bank calls *Smart Economics*.

As an impartial observer (even if I say so myself, and even if the world of policy consultants is crowded with 'impartial' observers), I should end with the one cause I know for sure will have a large impact on all other good causes: the empowerment of women and the guarantee of their sexual and reproductive rights.