A special event at the UN General Assembly on Sept 25, 2013 marks a bridge between the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to the end of 2015 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that presumably will run from 2016 to 2030. The special event will address urgent actions to accelerate progress to the MDGs over their remaining 2 years, while setting a timeline and diplomatic framework for creating the post-2015 development agenda. For many, the UN processes seems convoluted, or even irrelevant, but what is taking shape has the potential to help humanity make an urgent change of course to address the deep and interconnected economic, social, and environmental challenges the world faces.

The MDGs have been the most successful global undertaking in history to coordinate action to fight extreme poverty in all its forms: income, hunger, disease, lack of schooling, and deficient basic infrastructure. Most importantly, they have helped sub-Saharan Africa to enter an era of economic growth and disease reduction by focusing domestic and international policies, expertise, and finance on recalcitrant challenges, such as AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, low farm yields, and children out of school. The MDGs have mobilised an unprecedented focus on the global poor by promoting the cancellation of unaffordable debts; prompting the establishment of new organisations such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria; and encouraging new technologies for diagnostics, medicines, supply chains, microfinance, and infrastructure. They will not be met in full, but the MDGs have made their mark despite the hurdles of wars, the global financial crisis, tax evasion, and debilitating corruption in rich and poor countries alike.

It was in the context of this MDG-inspired progress that member states at the Rio+20 UN Conference on Sustainable Development, in June, 2012, committed to adopt global goals based on a holistic, sustainable development framework addressing the key challenges faced by all countries. On the 20th anniversary of the Rio Earth Summit—the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification—had failed to translate into transformative action on the ground. They concluded, rightly, that only by committing the world to ending extreme poverty while also placing social and environmental concerns into an expanded set of SDGs would there be the chance to mobilise urgent global action by governments, business, and civil society. Hence came their unanimous call for a new set of SDGs to follow the MDGs.

The complexity of the global negotiations to put the SDGs into practice may seem daunting, even self-defeating. The UN’s leadership and its 193 member states have embarked on an unprecedented scale of consultations and negotiations that will last until 2015. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon received several reports on how best to proceed, including from a High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, and from various international groups, including one that I lead on behalf of the Secretary-General, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network. He has recently issued his own report on the post-2015 development agenda to the UN General Assembly. In parallel, the UN member states created working groups to propose the specific SDGs; to examine financial options to meet them; and to establish a new high-level political forum that will put heads of state and government in the lead to oversee the implementation and monitoring of the SDGs.
Despite the ongoing negotiations, there is already near universal assent on key aspects of the emerging SDGs. The new goals should be centred on sustainable development, meaning the integration of economic, social, and environmental objectives. The highest priority of the new goals should be the end of extreme poverty in all its forms by 2030, completing the work begun by the MDGs. The SDGs should be universal and apply to all countries although placed in local context. This universality is especially relevant for environmental goals, on which rich countries have so far not met their global responsibilities. Yet it is also true of the emerging social goals, given that many rich countries have had a deterioration of social capital and a decline of social mobility in the past generation under the forces of globalisation, rapid technological change, and often-errant politics. The post-2015 agenda should also include the means of implementing the SDGs, including financing, technology, monitoring, and political accountability.

Cynics scoff at this flurry of activity, doubting that the mere statement of new global goals could make much difference in the face of powerful economic and political forces that treaties have been unable to affect. The cynics are wrong. Like the MDGs, the SDGs can provoke a new global awareness of needs and of possibilities on a global scale. Part of the story is generational: millions of young people around the world want to reshape the world for their own survival. The doubters underestimate the power of the SDGs to help harness breakthroughs in information, communications, materials, and biological technologies to solve problems of energy, water, food production, and universal access to health, education, and financial services.

There is the real possibility of a gathering revolution. Strong voices from across the world are coalescing around a new approach: SDGs to help the rising generation to set and mobilise and inspire leaders from business, civil society, and government to work together on solving deep and complex challenges. Time is short, the negotiations are laborious, and significant work remains to build the needed trust and consensus on priorities, yet the meetings taking place this week at the UN have the chance to make a profound positive contribution.

Jeffrey D Sachs
Earth Institute, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027, USA
sachs@ei.columbia.edu
I declare that I have no conflicts of interest.


Renewing the promise of survival for children

In 2015 the deadline to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) will have arrived, and the world will reflect on how it has kept its promises, particularly to its children. A new UNICEF report, Committing to Child Survival: A Promise Renewed Progress Report 2013, looks at the advances made so far in fulfilling the promise of survival to all the world’s children. The report, released on Sept 13, provides comprehensive analyses on progress towards MDG 4 with data generated by the UN Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation. The findings indicate that although there have been substantial gains in reducing global child deaths since 1990, child survival remains an urgent concern and immediate action is needed to redouble efforts to end preventable child deaths.

The most recent estimates show that the global rate of mortality in children younger than 5 years has roughly halved since 1990, decreasing from 90 deaths per