

Target Practice

In 2015, world leaders gathered at the United Nations' headquarters and declared its 17 'Sustainable Development Goals' (SDGs) which would dictate much of the expected \$2.5 trillion to be spent on them by 2030. Broad in nature, the underlying motives behind them are, on the whole, quite laudable; at least in such a way that they represent a cohesive effort to make the world a better place (ending poverty, ending world hunger, and tackling climate change, to name a few). Words are easier than action however, and while these SDGs have been compiled with good intentions, anyone who is time-poor (or just poor) will tell you that only so much can be achieved in a world of finite resources.



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At a smaller level, sensible people will prioritise mortgage repayments over expensive cars and lavish holidays, or dedicate years studying for their degree before backpacking in Australia.

Everyone has different priorities at any given time and while each can be tackled in isolation, the difficulty compounds as attention is split between multiple objectives. Similarly, the FIM-sponsored Manx charity "Beach Buddies" would not be nearly as large and as well-recognised as it is today, if its founder, Bill Dale, spent an equal amount of time working at the local hospice (admirable as this might be) as he does spreading the message about our precious shorelines. Essentially, doing a little bit of good everywhere is less effective than doing lots of good in specific, prioritised places.

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media, getting the attention they deserve. The unfortunate reality is that we focus most on those topics which make the headlines, be it those with the best PR or those with which we resonate the most. In that context, it makes sense to order those 17 SDGs by maximum impact, however this is made all the more difficult because overlying these goals, the UN has highlighted a further 169 targets to achieve by 2030. The fact there are as many as 169 targets to begin with is symptomatic of the "natural political inclination to promise all good things to everyone" (Finn Kydland, Economics Professor & Nobel Laureate) without recognising that the impact returns from some of these targets are negligible at best.

A project called the Copenhagen Consensus (run by the Copenhagen Consensus Center and conceived by Bjorn Lomborg) performed a series of cost-benefit analyses

on these targets to rank-order them by overall economic, social and environmental impact per dollar spent. The aim was not to argue specifically for or against investment in any selected areas, but instead to provide a sense of direction when policies are driven by emotion. Like a menu at a restaurant, you don't always go for the priciest item available and may instead prefer something suited to your nutritional needs.

The project highlighted that focusing on the top 19 targets, such as reducing chronic child nutrition, reducing trade restrictions (full Doha), and halving malaria infection, could deliver \$20-\$40 of social benefits per dollar spent. By contrast, dedicating an equal funding to each of the 169 targets would reduce that per-dollar gain to less than \$10. Putting it another way, the budget could be quadrupled if efficiently allocated.

Most of the top nineteen ranked low in the priority ladder when measured in terms of emotional resonance, especially in relation to the developed world, where we can afford to be more selective about issues to address. For example, solutions for tackling climate change, whether by taxing carbon emissions or drastically overhauling a nation's energy practices (such the Green New Deal

proposed by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in the US), now feature heavily in the political sphere, at a time when tuberculosis is barely recognised. However, when analysed on a cost-benefit basis, measures designed to reduce carbon emissions are disappointing. A paper from the Copenhagen Consensus notes that "a target to keep temperatures at 2°C below pre-industrial levels has lower benefits than costs", returning less than one dollar for every dollar spent. Investing 0.5% of GDP into energy technology and RD&D (Research, Development & Demonstration) on the other hand, is expected to return \$11 for every dollar spent.

The cold hard economics presented by the Copenhagen Consensus could never replace media sensationalism as a whole and, while tuberculosis remains a major cause of global mortality, despite having a low-cost and highly effective treatment, it has yet to garner the same kind of emotionally-charged approach we see towards climate change, recently manifested in a series of school walkouts, suggesting that the end of the world was nigh. One might be forgiven for thinking these youngsters were relatively unfazed by the issue but were more than happy to dodge school for a few hours. Maybe I'm just being cynical?

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