

# The Sustainable Development Goals

## The role of ethics



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The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by global leaders at the United Nations (UN) headquarters in September 2015. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets represent a bold transformational economic, social and environmental agenda relating to future international development. The SDGs set priorities and benchmarks for, among other issues, ending poverty and improving nutrition globally by 2030. Seeking to build on their predecessors, the Millennium Development Goals – which expired at the end of 2015 – the SDGs apply universally to all UN member states. However, while movement towards sustainable development, global eradication of poverty, and improved global nutrition is to be welcomed, the SDGs lack legal status and explicit enforcement mechanisms. They also add to an array of existing international nutrition-centered initiatives which, to date, have had mixed results in pursuit of their respective agendas. For the SDGs to elicit public trust and confidence, ethics must be central to their realization.

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### The nature of the SDGs

The SDGs represent collective aspirational goals of the international community and are intended to be integrated and indivisible, global in nature, and universally applicable. Although the SDGs are grounded in human rights norms and are intended to be universally applicable, they are not a negotiated treaty. Therefore, at best, the SDGs will function as a form of “soft law”.<sup>1</sup> To this end, the UN is developing a global reporting mechanism that will call on countries to voluntarily submit data to track progress in light of the SDGs indicators. The UN’s high-level political forum under the auspices of the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council will have the central role in overseeing follow-up and country review at the global level. The effective implementation of the SDGs will thus depend on a mutually supportive relationship between the SDGs and international law. Despite the need for such symbiosis, only three conventions are explicitly included in the SDGs:

1. The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (Goal 13);
2. The Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (Target 3.a); and
3. The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (Target 14.c).

Neither the UN Charter – which speaks about, among other issues, promoting “higher standards of living” (UN Charter Article 55a), solutions to health and related problems (UN Charter article 55b) – nor human rights instruments (including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) have been included in the SDGs. The SDGs allude to “World Trade Organization agreements” (Target 10.a) but only in relation to special and differential treatment for developing countries. None of the 31 targets of the “justice” and “implementation” goals (Goals 16 & 17) make any reference to international law.



Outside the actual SDGs, the preceding SDGs Agenda's declaration makes reference to international instruments. This includes the UN Charter, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and "other international instruments relating to human rights." Neither the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights nor the International Covenant on Cultural, Social and Economic Rights are referred to explicitly in any part of the Agenda. The Agenda makes only vague reference to "full respect for" and "commitment to" international law. This governance gap has led commentators to note that the SDGs "will represent a rhetorical tool that every government official and international aid worker will have to pay homage to while failing to hold accountable the appropriate actors in international development."<sup>2</sup> The lack of firm accountability and enforcement mechanisms in the SDGs raises questions about the distinction between the SDGs and similar nutrition-related aspirational frameworks which have had limited impact, to date.

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#### Crowded space: SDGs and existing global nutritional initiatives

While all the SDGs are intended to be integrated and indivisible, the following SDGs are of particular relevance to health and nutrition:

- > End poverty in all its forms everywhere (Goal 1);
- > End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture (Goal 2);
- > Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages (Goal 3); and
- > Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all (Goal 6).

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### “Compliance with the SDGs will depend on strong moral leadership from national authorities and sustained pressure from the international community”

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To achieve these goals, it will be essential to unite the global nutrition community around a common set of values, goals, and

targets. This will be challenging, given that the international nutrition arena is already a crowded space with a bewildering array of UN agencies and bodies involved in nutrition-related initiatives. These include the activities of the five UN agencies with a mandate in nutrition (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO), as well as intra-UN initiatives, such as REACH (Renewed Efforts Against Child Hunger and Undernutrition), which collectively work toward realizing the UN Global Nutrition Agenda. The UN Global Nutrition Agenda describes the vision and guiding principles for UN work on nutrition and outlines the broad aims that these five UN agencies will pursue collectively over the next five years.<sup>3</sup> The activities of the above five agencies occur in addition to the activities of several other UN bodies, including IAEA, UNEP, UNHCR, UN Women, UNFPA, and the World Bank, which also address nutrition at the global level to some degree. The work of all these players occurs in addition to the work of the UN Standing Committee on Nutrition (UNSCN), whose mandate includes monitoring and promoting cooperation among UN agencies and partner organizations in support of community, national, regional, and international efforts to end malnutrition in all of its forms in this generation.<sup>4</sup> This mandate is carried out by UNSCN Task Forces and Working Groups. Adding to the crowded international nutrition arena are the activities of the Committee on World Food Security and the World Health Assembly (WHA), the latter of which, in 2012, endorsed the comprehensive implementation plan on maternal, infant and young child nutrition, which included six global targets focusing on stunting, anemia, low birth weight, childhood overweight, breastfeeding, and wasting<sup>5</sup> to be achieved by 2025, and five corresponding actions (spelt out in resolution WHA65.6).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, a Global Monitoring Framework on Maternal, Infant and Young Child Nutrition, which comprises 14 core indicators, was adopted by the WHA in May 2015.<sup>7</sup> While these indicators have been aligned with corresponding SDG indicators, they will require adjustment. Similarly, to avoid duplication and redundancy, the SDG monitoring system in relation to health and nutrition must synergize with the WHA Global Monitoring Framework, as well similar monitoring initiatives, such as the UNICEF – WHO – World Bank Group joint child malnutrition estimates,<sup>8</sup> the Global Nutrition Report (GNR), the Global database on the Implementation of Nutrition Action (GINA), the International Food Aid Information System (INTERFAIS), the Food Security Information Network (FSIN), and the United Nations Statistics Division's Global Indicator Database and Statistical Yearbook, which includes collated data on, among other indicators, health and nutrition. Several regional initiatives (such as the African Union's African Regional Nutrition Strategy for the period 2016–2025) and global health initiatives (such as those under the auspices of the International Food Policy Research Institute [IFPRI], Coverage Monitoring Network [CMN], Save the Children, the Scaling Up Nutrition [SUN] Movement and

the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition [GAIN]) – are also involved in nutrition-related strategies and monitoring activities.

While synergy with concurrent health and nutrition initiatives will be key to realizing the SDGs, because of the fact that the SDGs lack an enforcement mechanism if countries fail to reach their goals or to submit data for review, compliance will largely depend on strong moral leadership on the part of national authorities and sustained pressure on the part of the international community. The failure of existing soft-law instruments to inspire nutrition-related policy reform in many settings globally – despite the open endorsement of several WHA Resolutions on

nutrition on the part of national health authorities serving on the WHA – highlight the fact that political rhetoric alone will be inadequate to realize the SDGs, and they underpin why the field of ethics must be central to realizing the SDGs.

**How the field of ethics can facilitate the realization of the SDGs**

Ethics, also known as moral philosophy, involves systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong behavior.<sup>9</sup> Ethics has been described as the branch of philosophy that defines what is good for the individual and for society,

**Box 1: Proposed set of ethics principles to guide decision-making in relation to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals**

**1. Stewardship and responsibility**

Authorities, financiers, the private sector, civil society, and the public at large have a responsibility to protect and develop limited resources, and to ensure ecological integrity and human well-being. Initiatives should be implemented in a manner that most impacts on poverty reduction, ending hunger, achieving food security, improving nutrition, promoting sustainable agriculture, and improving human health.

**2. Respect for persons**

Authorities, financiers, the private sector, civil society, and the public at large have a duty to act responsibly and prudently towards each other, and towards future generations, in relation to resources and in respect of initiatives that most impact on poverty reduction, ending hunger, achieving food security, improving nutrition, promoting sustainable agriculture, and improving human health.

**3. Non-maleficence**

Authorities, financiers, the private sector, civil society, and the public at large have a moral obligation not to harm, facilitate harm, or be complicit in the harm of others in relation to initiatives that could have an impact on poverty reduction and human health.

**4. Risk-benefit analysis and burden identification**

The implications of initiatives that have an impact on poverty and human health must be identified in a timely manner, preferably prospectively.

**5. Reasonableness and relevance**

The rationale that underpins initiatives which impact, or could

impact, poverty and human health must appeal to relevant evidence, values, and principles.

**6. Collaboration**

Authorities, the private sector, the international community, civil society, and the public at large should engage in collaborations to mitigate the impact of initiatives that could exacerbate poverty and the adverse human health outcomes associated therewith.

**7. Least harm**

If an existing or proposed project or policy that actually or potentially detrimentally impacts on poverty and human health can be realized by feasible alternatives that are less adverse to poverty and human health, these alternatives ought to be pursued as a first resort.

**8. Solidarity, duty of rescue, justice, and reciprocity**

Humans have a moral responsibility to ensure the common welfare of humankind, particularly that of the poor and marginalized, who are experiencing or could experience detrimental health outcomes related to poverty. This necessitates providing aid and support to these individuals.

**9. Transparency, publicity, and engagement**

The rationales and potential health implications of existing or proposed initiatives that have an impact on, or could have an impact on, poverty and human health must be publicly disclosed and made accessible to affected stakeholders by means of meaningful engagement processes.

**10. Accountability, appeal, and enforcement**

Stakeholders who are being, or who stand to be, affected by initiatives that are impacting, or could impact, poverty and human health, must be given a fair opportunity to appeal against such initiatives, and to have their appeal upheld.



The panel who discussed the theme "Defining obligations and taking responsibility for stakeholder actions" at the Micronutrient Forum 2014 (left to right): Jerome Singh (UKZN), Thiago Luchesi (WVI), Purnima Menon (IFPRI), Rachel Toku-Appiah (GMT), Martin Bloem (WFP).

and establishes the nature of obligations, or duties, that people owe themselves and one another. It may be said that ethics offers a normative guidance framework on what should be done to ensure good for the individual and society, regardless of the absence or applicability of a legal obligation. Put differently, an ethical/moral duty is a duty which one owes and ought to perform, but which one is not legally bound to fulfil. Seen in this context, the omission of key international law instruments and enforcement mechanisms in the SDGs will necessitate a problem-solving mindset based on ethics<sup>10</sup> to deliver on SDG promises. To this end, adherence to ethics norms (see Box 1) could facilitate the realization of the SDGs.<sup>11</sup>

### Conclusion

In the absence of legally binding compliance and accountability mechanisms, realizing the SDGs will require a mindset shift on the part of authorities – from empty political rhetoric that has generally characterized the realization of other soft-law international instruments, to a problem-solving mindset based on ad-

herence to explicit ethical benchmarks. Such an approach could help engender public trust and confidence in national authorities, transnational organizations, and soft-law instruments, and could facilitate the realization of the SDGs.

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