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The Post-2015 Global Development Agenda

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) established by the international community in the year 2000 sunset in 2015 and will be replaced by a new global development agenda for the period 2016 through 2030. The “post-2015 development agenda,” as it is often called, has been the subject of an extensive United Nations-led process and debate that culminated in the establishment of a formal 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the 70th session of the U.N. General Assembly on September 25, 2015. This In Focus provides a brief overview of the MDGs, the new sustainable development goals (SDGs), key events in the development and rollout of the post-2015 development agenda, and issues that may be of particular interest to Congress.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

The MDGs are a group of eight broad development goals agreed to by 189 U.N. member states—including the United States—as part of the 2000 Millennium Declaration. They are aspirational, and commitments are non-binding. The goals, which governments aimed to achieve by the end of 2015, are (1) eradicating extreme hunger and poverty; (2) achieving universal primary education; (3) promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment; (4) reducing the under-five child mortality rate; (5) reducing the maternal mortality rate; (6) combating HIV/AIDS and other diseases; (7) ensuring environmental sustainability; and (8) developing a Global Partnership for Development. The goals were further refined by 21 targets and 60 measurable indicators for monitoring progress.

Since 2000, governments have worked to achieve the MDGs with mixed results. Goals related to reducing extreme poverty, access to improved drinking water, and gender parity in elementary education, for example, have been achieved in many regions. Far less progress has been reported on reducing maternal mortality, access to reproductive health, and women’s representation in national parliaments, among others. Data also indicates that progress toward the goals is unevenly distributed across regions and countries. India and China, for example, have made considerable progress in achieving the MDGs, while many countries in sub-Saharan Africa are expected to meet few of the goals. For some of the goals and indicators, insufficient data are available to measure progress.

According to the 2015 MDG progress report, the majority of MDGs are not likely to be fully achieved by the end of 2015. Development experts and political leaders have questioned whether the goals are realistic and appropriate, whether donor funding and government accountability are adequate, and whether progress that has been made can be attributed to the global goal-setting process.

Figure 1. MDG Progress by Region, 2015



Source: CRS analysis of MDG 2015 Progress Chart.

Note: Chart reflects the 16 of the 21 MDG targets for which data are reported in the 2015 progress report.

The Post-2015 Development Agenda

As U.N. member states and other stakeholders made a final push to achieve the MDG targets in recent years, they simultaneously began a process to establish a global development agenda for the post-2015 period. Like the MDGs, the recently adopted new agenda is non-binding, intended to focus global development efforts.

The post-2015 agenda setting process began at the 2012 U.N. Conference on Sustainable Development, in Rio de Janeiro, which produced an outcome document that assessed progress on the MDGs and recommended a process for developing a global post-2015 development agenda. The intergovernmental processes established by the Rio conference were completed at the end of 2014, and a synthesis report by the U.N. Secretary-General on the post-2015 sustainable development agenda was released in December 2014. The draft goals in that report were referred to as the sustainable development goals (SDGs), named after the process started in Rio de Janeiro.

U.S. Role. The United States engaged in the SDG development process primarily through Tony Pipa, U.S. Special Coordinator for the Post-2015 Development Agenda, working with the U.S. Agency for International Development and the U.S. Mission to the United Nations. State Department documents suggest that the U.S. focus in SDG negotiations was on country ownership, the inclusion of marginalized populations, data transparency, and the equality of women and girls, among other things.

Congress did not have a direct role in development or adoption of the SDGs, but may have a significant role in funding programs designed to support the SDGs.

Sustainable Development Goals. The outcome of the post-2015 development agenda process is the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development framework, which identifies 17 SDGs and 169 related targets. Several SDGs build upon the MDGs, raising the bar in areas where progress has been made, while others emphasize new priorities. Most notably, the SDGs include goals related to peace and justice, infrastructure, and equality that were not in the MDGs, and expand upon the goals related to extreme poverty and environmental protection.

Figure 2. 2030 Sustainable Development Goals

1	End poverty	★ New in SDGs
2	End hunger	(Others build on existing MDGs)
3	Healthy Lives and Well Being for All	
4	Inclusive and equitable quality education	
5	Gender equality	
6	Water and Sanitation for all	
★ 7	Reliable and sustainable energy for all	
8	Economic growth and decent work for all	
★ 9	Resilient infrastructure and inclusive industrialization	
★ 10	Reduce inequality within and among countries	
★ 11	Inclusive, safe and sustainable cities	
★ 12	Sustainable consumption and production	
13	Combat climate change	
14	Conserve ocean, sea and marine resources	
15	Protect and restore terrestrial ecosystems	
★ 16	Peace, justice, and accountable institutions for all	
17	Strengthen global partnership	

Source: CRS analysis of <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/1579SDGs%20Proposal.pdf>.

Aside from the specific goals, there are a few general ways in which the SDGs appear to differ from the MDGs:

- **Universality.** Whereas the MDGs were largely viewed as developed country priorities for the developing world, the SDGs are intended to be universal, developed through an unprecedented global outreach process and applying to all countries. This means that the United States and other developed countries will also be assessed for progress against the targets.
- **Country specific.** While there are global targets, as with the MDGs, many SDG targets would be established at the country level, allowing success to be relative to each country's starting point and unique challenges.
- **Broader financing.** The MDGs were largely intended to be donor financed, while the SDGs focus more on mobilizing domestic and private sector resources, though foreign aid is still an important component.

While the expanded goals and shifting focus of the SDGs are cited by some experts as reflecting the inclusive

consultation process and lessons learned from the MDGs about the complexity of development, critics assert that the consensus approach to developing the 2030 Agenda has resulted in a product that is not specific enough to be implementable or realistic enough to be achievable. Some observers are also concerned that the concept of varying national targets may undermine accountability and that the key theme of the agenda, sustainability, is not well defined.

After years of planning, the post-2015 agenda development process culminated with multiple events in 2015:

- On July 13, the Third International Conference on Financing for Development convened in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where developed countries affirmed their commitment to providing development assistance and countries agreed to various measures to increase domestic resource mobilization.
- On September 25, the U.N. General Assembly convened in New York, adopting the 17 SDGs of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
- On November 30, global leaders convened in Paris at a United Nations Climate Change Conference to negotiate a global climate agreement, viewed by many as essential to implementation of the SDGs. An agreement was reached on December 12.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development takes effect in January 2016.

Issues for Congress

As the world's leading donor of official development assistance, the United States will likely play a key role in funding implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Most of this funding would be appropriated by Congress through annual State Department, Foreign Operations and Related Agencies appropriations legislation. Foreign aid funding is shaped by U.S. foreign policy and congressional priorities, and it is unclear how much influence, if any, the SDGs will have on U.S. funding priorities. U.S. foreign assistance programs already align with the SDGs to a large degree, but there may be areas of disagreement, particularly with respect to climate change.

Domestically, Congress may consider whether legislative action is appropriate to achieve the SDGs within the United States. Many of the proposed SDGs are of limited relevance in the United States, where, for example, the vast majority of citizens have access to food, education, sanitation services, and energy. However, the United States may not currently meet targets on proposed goals related to inequality within countries, inclusive and safe cities, and representation of women in legislatures, among others. In his address before the United Nations at the 2030 Agenda summit, President Obama stated that the United States is committed to achieving the SDGs.

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