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Goals miss the mark

09.24.10 - 02:03 pm

When world leaders assembled this week in New York to discuss development policy, there was a lot of noise about the failure of rich countries to attain the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted in 2001 by the United Nations member states.

Chief among the goals is halving the proportion of people who are extremely poor -- that is, individuals living on less than a dollar a day -- by 2015. The other goals target universal primary education; gender equality; child mortality; maternal health; HIV/AIDS and malaria; and environmental sustainability.

As a student and teacher of development policy, I believe it is high time for policymakers to stop wasting their time with the pie-in-the-sky MDGs. In short, while the intention that led UN member states to adopt them is noble, the MDGs themselves are all just talk.

Economist Jeffrey Sachs, an adviser to the UN on development policy, claims the world's wealthiest countries lack the will to meet the goals. As an analogy, think of MDGS as New Year's resolutions: "I will lose weight, quit smoking, exercise more, read one nonfiction book a week and learn to play the piano this year!" But just as it is better to commit to piecemeal lifestyle improvements than to be overly ambitious and try to improve everything all at once, it is best for policymakers to focus on humble, incremental policy objectives.

Over the past 10 years, a revolution has taken place in development policy research which has led to new understanding about whether specific policy interventions actually work and, when they do work, to what extent. The charge has been led by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Esther Duflo and her collaborators.

Among the findings:

n Drugs that kill intestinal parasites have been shown to improve the health of treated children and the school attendance of both treated and untreated children as well as, surprisingly, the health of the latter.

n Information campaigns to inform young women about the relative risks of contracting HIV from potential sexual partners have been shown to decrease HIV infection rates among these young women.

n Conditional cash transfer programs, which provide education grants to poor mothers provided they satisfy certain criteria, have been shown to increase school enrollment, among other things.

All three of these findings are the result of asking simple questions and answering them using the best possible data. In my own ongoing research on agricultural value chains in Madagascar and on micro-insurance in Mali, I strive to ask similarly simple questions and answer them using careful research designs.

Instead of making vague promises about delivering overly ambitious results by a specific date, we should promise the implementation of policies that have been shown to work. Not only will this actually help alleviate poverty, it will be a better use of donor funds, which ultimately come from taxpayers in rich countries.

Marc Bellemare is an assistant professor of economics and public policy in the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University.

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