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The U.N.'s useless promises

By Marc F. Bellemare

When world leaders assembled in New York to discuss development policy last week, there was a lot of noise about rich countries' failure to attain the Millennium Development Goals, which were adopted by the United Nations' member states in 2001. Chief among the goals is halving the proportion of people who are extremely poor - that is, living on less than a dollar a day - by 2015. The other goals involve primary education, gender equality, child mortality, maternal health, HIV/AIDS, malaria, and environmental sustainability.

As a student and teacher of development policy, I believe it's time for policymakers to stop wasting their time with the pie-in-the-sky Millennium Development Goals. While the intentions behind them are noble, the goals are all talk.

Economist Jeffrey Sachs, a U.N. adviser, says the world's wealthiest countries lack the will to meet the goals, which resemble overly ambitious New Year's resolutions: "I will lose weight, quit smoking, exercise more, read a book a week, and learn to play the piano!" Just as people should commit to achievable lifestyle improvements, policymakers should focus on humble, incremental policy objectives.

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Esther Duflo and her collaborators have learned a lot about successful development policy in recent years. They have found, for example, that:

The use of drugs that kill intestinal parasites improves the health and school attendance of both treated and untreated children in a community.


Campaigns to inform young women about the relative risks of contracting HIV from potential sexual partners decrease infection rates.

Programs providing education grants to poor mothers if they satisfy certain criteria increase school enrollment.

All of these findings came from asking simple questions and answering them using the best available data. I strive to ask similarly simple questions and answer them in my own research on agriculture in Madagascar and micro-insurance in Mali.

Instead of making vague promises about delivering impossible results by a certain date, we should promise to implement policies that have been shown to work. This will help alleviate poverty and make better use of donor nations' funds.

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