An Ambitious Development Agenda From the U.N.

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD  SEPT. 28, 2015

In the last 15 years, the world has made great progress in reducing poverty, in part because of eight targets known as Millennium Development Goals that the United Nations committed to in 2000. Each carried a 2015 deadline. One goal — of cutting extreme poverty by half as measured by the proportion of people living on less than $1.25 a day — was in fact met five years ahead of schedule. Maternal mortality was not cut by three-fourths, as the U.N. wanted, but it was cut nearly in half, no small achievement.

Now, the U.N. is doubling down and setting even more ambitious development goals for the next 15 years. But this time it faces a very big obstacle: a slowing global economy, which will require the leaders of developing countries, especially those in Africa and Asia, where most of the world’s poorest people live, to make big policy changes.

The Millennium Development Goals coincided with a period of very rapid growth in developing economies, especially in places like Brazil, China and India, making it easier for those countries to generate jobs and invest in health, education and other public services. All of those countries are growing at slower paces now, and their leaders do not seem to have credible strategies
for dealing with their problems. Each country has a unique set of problems, but they all need to make their economies more productive and inclusive.

The new targets are known as the Sustainable Development Goals, and they were formally adopted by the United Nations on Friday. Nothing appears to have been left out. There are 17 goals in all, covering areas like poverty, public health, the environment, education and justice.

So far, they are rather vaguely stated. The U.N. has not yet established statistical indicators against which to measure progress. It promises these numbers in the coming months. That won’t be easy in some cases: Goal No. 16, for example, calls on countries to “Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.”

Several goals, including those on sustainable consumption and production (No. 12), climate change (No. 13), conserving oceans (No. 14) and sustainable use of land (No. 15) cover a lot of the same ground and might easily have been consolidated. The U.N. should have picked fewer and more targeted goals.

That said, this is a worthy, high-minded effort. Developed economies like those of the United States, the European Union and Japan need to play an important role by providing more aid, expertise and private investment to developing countries. And industrialized nations need to revive their economies to help lift global growth, which the International Monetary Fund estimates will slow to 3.3 percent this year, from 3.4 percent in 2014.

Multilateral agencies like the World Bank can also help with research and by financing public works projects. And charities like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation will be critical in providing money and leadership to achieve public health goals like eliminating malaria and other tropical diseases (No. 3).

Realistically, some nations may be beyond help at this point because they are so deeply mired in war and other conflicts. Without peace and better
political leadership, it is hard to anticipate big gains in development in places like Iraq, Libya, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Fifteen years ago, the Millennium Development Goals showed that setting ambitious targets helps rally government officials, individuals and businesses toward a common cause. This time around, leaders everywhere will need to adopt creative and aggressive policies to boost a world economy that now seems stuck in neutral.

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