

The
Economist

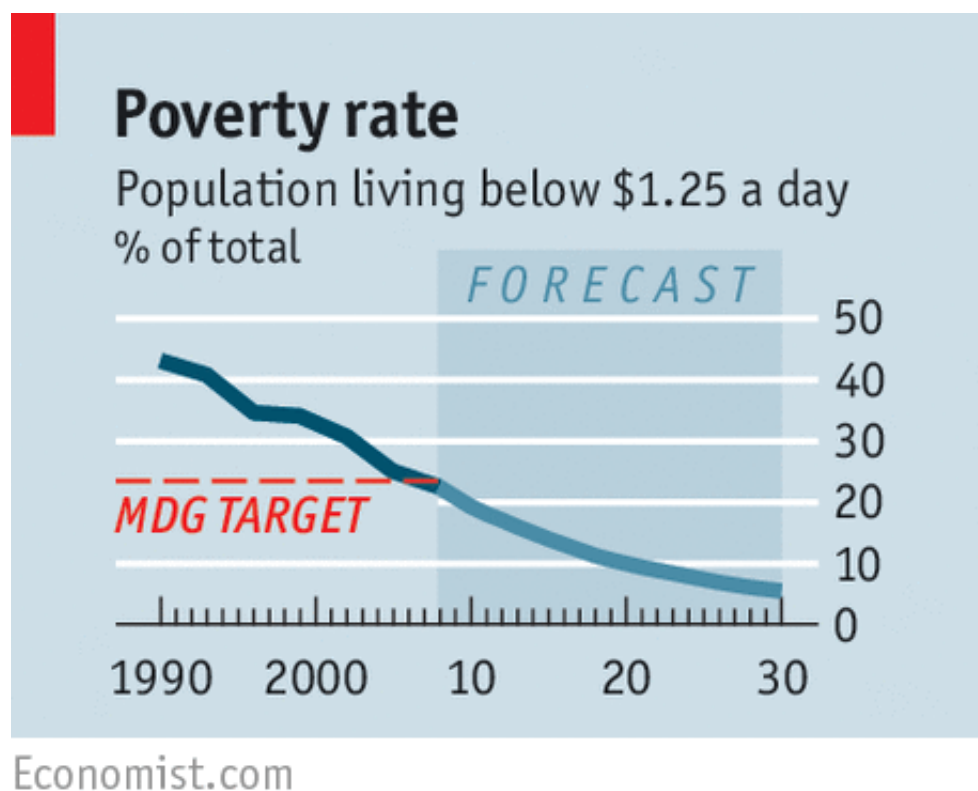
Development

The 169 commandments

The proposed sustainable development goals would be worse than useless

Mar 28th 2015 | From the print edition

MOSES brought ten commandments down from Mount Sinai. If only the UN's proposed list of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were as concise. The SDGs are supposed to set out how to improve the lives of the poor in emerging countries, and how to steer money and government policy towards areas where they can do the most good. But the efforts of the SDG drafting committees are so sprawling and misconceived that the entire enterprise is being set up to fail. That would be not just a wasted opportunity, but also a betrayal of the world's poorest people.



The SDGs are the successors to the development targets that governments around the world signed up to in 2000 and promised to reach by 2015. There are eight of these so-called Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with 21 sub-targets, from educating girls to cutting maternal mortality. Overall, the MDGs have a decent record. Some (such as reducing maternal and child mortality) will be missed by miles. But others, such as cutting by half the share of people who live in abject poverty, have been reached. The MDGs themselves do not always deserve the credit: the plunge in the global poverty rate has far more to do with growth in China

than anything agreed on at the UN. But in other cases, such as boosting access to clean water, the prospect of missing an international target shamed countries into acting better than they might have otherwise.

The developing countries and Western aid agencies drawing up the SDGs, which would set targets for 2030 (see [article](http://www.economist.com/news/international/21647307-2015-will-be-big-year-global-governance-perhaps-too-big-unsustainable-goals) (<http://www.economist.com/news/international/21647307-2015-will-be-big-year-global-governance-perhaps-too-big-unsustainable-goals>)), seem to think that you cannot have too much of a good thing. They love the MDGs and want more—148 more. At the moment there are 169 proposed targets, grouped into 17 goals. These are ambitions on a Biblical scale, and not in a good way.

Their supporters justify the proliferation by saying the SDGs are more ambitious than their predecessors: they extend to things such as urbanisation, infrastructure and climate change. The argument is that cutting poverty is not a simple matter. It is rooted in a whole system of inequality and injustice, meaning that you need lots of targets to improve governance, encourage transparency, reduce inequality and so on.

There is truth in that argument, but the SDGs are still a mess. Every lobby group has pitched in for its own special interest. The targets include calls for sustainable tourism and a “global partnership for sustainable development complemented by multi-stakeholder partnerships”, whatever that means.

Developing countries seem to think that the more goals there are, the more aid money they will receive. They are wrong. The SDGs are unfeasibly expensive. Meeting them would cost \$2 trillion–3 trillion a year of public and private money over 15 years. That is roughly 15% of annual global savings, or 4% of world GDP. At the moment, Western governments promise to provide 0.7% of GDP in aid, and in fact stump up only about a third of that. Planning to spend many times the amount that countries fail to give today is pure fantasy.

The backers of the SDGs concede from the outset that not all countries will meet all the targets—an admission that robs the goals of the power to shame. The MDGs at least identified priorities and chivvied along countries that failed to live up to their promises; a set of 169 commandments means, in practice, no priorities at all.

By establishing myriad of top-down targets, the SDG drafters also flout one of the most important lessons of development: that everywhere is different. Local context is vital; policies that work in one place may not work in another. The MDGs were broad enough to allow local variation. The SDGs are narrow. They will lead to cookie-cutter development policies, which will almost certainly work less well.

Stupid development goals

Worst of all, the SDGs are a distraction. Over the next 15 years, the world has a chance to eliminate extreme poverty—that is, to end the misery of almost 1 billion people who live on no more than \$1.25 a day. This goal will not be achieved automatically; in many places the trends today point in the wrong direction. But it could be reached at reasonable cost. Basic transfer programmes to lift everyone above the bare-minimum poverty line would ask for about \$65 billion a year, a modest amount compared with \$3 trillion. This aim is SDG One. It would have a much better chance of being achieved if it stood at the head of a very short list.

That could still be done. Governments are to approve the SDGs in September. By then the list should honour Moses and be pruned to ten goals aimed squarely at reducing poverty, boosting education (for example, extending girls' schooling by two years) and improving health (say by halving the rate of malaria infection). Today's SDGs are full of good intentions, but everyone knows where good intentions lead.

From the print edition: Leaders