

Going for the Goals

Progress made & challenges faced in meeting Sustainable Development Goals

By Bob Ferguson



In September, the United Nations (UN) adopted what are known as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The SDGs are a set of 17 goals and 169 targets with an overall goal of eradicating poverty worldwide. They are designed to stimulate action and drive investments in many areas between now and 2030 to improve economic, social and environmental conditions that most contribute to poverty.

Set of Goals

It certainly is beyond the scope of this column to review all of the SDG goals and targets, or to discuss the details of the controversies behind the development and negotiation of such wide-reaching and ambitious goals. There is, however, a significant focus on water and wastewater within the SDGs.

The statistics on world water and sanitation availability are staggering. As I've written before, no more than half of the world's households have clean water at home, and almost 3 billion people do not use improved—let alone modern—sanitation or sewage treatment. One billion people, or about 15% of the world's population, practice open defecation. Unsafe water and poor sanitation still kill more young children than malaria, AIDS and accidents combined. Progress in this area offers tremendous opportunity to improve the lives of billions of people around the world.

Considering these statistics, is a goal of eradicating poverty and providing water and sanitation for most of the globe in 15 years a practical and achievable objective?

Progress Report

Consider the progress under the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)—the UN goals for the 15 years ending

in 2015. The MDGs had eight goals, 18 targets and an overall goal to "halve extreme poverty." According to experts, in that time, 500 million more people rose above the poverty line. More than 2 billion people gained access to a sustainable source of drinking water, and more than 1.5 billion gained access to sanitation. Open defecation and the use of untreated water is declining. The death rate for children has fallen by 30% and deaths from malaria have fallen by 25%. This is remarkable progress.

The SDGs are designed to build on this progress and also declare that drinking water should be safe, affordable and ideally be provided with service to each household. These elements are a much higher standard and will be tougher to meet.

In development, we cannot simply throw money at the issue, but need to understand the ability of countries to "absorb" assistance and make necessary changes. Countries with little infrastructure and use of improved sanitation will not have the systems and policies in place that allow for the work to be sufficiently organized to begin. Once availability of improved services approaches 100%, reaching the final few percent becomes difficult. This will impact both the cost, speed and completeness to which this goal can be met.

One also must consider that this may be a moving target. Climate change, war and political upheavals all have the potential to disrupt access to or contaminate drinking water sources. Events that cause migrations—temporary or otherwise—will change the parameters, including the size and composition of the population to be served, and may change the path and timing to the end goal.

This is not to say that substantial progress cannot be made—it can and will be. But the discussion around the expectations for the SDGs would more

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rationally center on how close we can get the goal of universal in-home, safe, affordable water and sanitation and not whether success means 100% achievement of this goal.

But the progress and achievements of the MDGs show that substantial improvements can be made, and while the SDGs outline ambitious goals, they are nonetheless possible. Even if we only get close to the goals, we will be able to dramatically reduce extreme poverty worldwide by 2030 and provide safe drinking water and some level of sewerage and wastewater treatment to most everyone on the planet and, in turn, greatly reduce child mortality, disease and untimely death and greatly improve the lives and futures of billions—yes, billions—of people worldwide.

The next 15 years will be a truly exciting period in human history. **w&wd**

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