



**Statement before the House Foreign Affairs  
Subcommittee on International Development, International  
Organizations and Global Corporate Social Impact**

***“The Sustainable Development Goals  
and Recovery from the Covid-19  
Pandemic: Implications for U.S. Policy.”***

A Testimony by:

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**September 15, 2022**

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Thank you, Chairman Castro and Ranking Member Malliotakis, for inviting me to speak on the implications for U.S. policy of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. I will note that this is the first committee hearing in any body of the U.S. Congress in the last seven years specifically focused on the Sustainable Development Goals. I am pleased that you are holding this hearing.

My message today is that we should take the Sustainable Development Goals more seriously, but not literally. I'll get to what I mean by that in my testimony.

In essence, the SDGs provide a common language for talking about challenges, putting forward aspirational Goals we can all work towards, and an attempt to measure progress. The Sustainable Development Goals have been heavily influenced by the preferences of market democracies including the United States and the Goals have their “finger on the scale” in support of democratic governance and human rights.

For context, the Sustainable Development Goals are a series of 17 interlinked development Goals agreed to by world leaders in a 2015 resolution entitled “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.” These Goals aim to provide a “shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet.” They span a diverse array of topics including the elimination of poverty and hunger, and improving health and education, among others. Within the 17 Goals are 169 more specific targets.<sup>1</sup> The Goals are not a treaty but are a form of “soft law.”

There have been other development goals in the past. However, they were focused entirely on poor countries.<sup>2</sup> A distinctive quality of the SDGs is that they are universal, intended to engage all countries, rich and poor, with a challenging ambition “to leave no-one behind.”

These Goals are less well-known in the United States but are very well-known globally, especially in poor countries. Many of the world’s largest multinational corporations have taken them quite seriously and many companies talk about how their business activities and how their companies’ “good works” align with and contribute to the Goals.<sup>3</sup> Some developing countries have created specific government action plans around the SDGs.<sup>4 5</sup> Most bilateral aid programs, including that

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<sup>1</sup> *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* | Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (n.d.). Retrieved September 13, 2022, from <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>

<sup>2</sup> *United Nations Millennium Development Goals*. (n.d.). United Nations. Retrieved September 13, 2022, from <https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/poverty.shtml>

<sup>3</sup> Affairs, C. P., Government and Public. (n.d.). *Contributing to the SDGs*. Chevron.Com. Retrieved September 13, 2022, from <https://www.chevron.com/stories/chevron-and-the-u-n-sustainable-development-goals>

<sup>4</sup> *About BRI-SDGs | Jointly Building Belt and Road towards SDGs*. (n.d.). Retrieved September 13, 2022, from <https://www.brisdgs.org/about-bri-sdgs>

<sup>5</sup> *Guide to the Integration of Sustainable Development Goals in Brazilian Municipalities*. (n.d.). Retrieved September 13, 2022, from <https://www.local2030.org/library/view/332>

of China,<sup>6</sup> use the SDGs as a point of reference when they talk about what they are doing in terms of foreign aid internationally. Multilateral development banks and even private philanthropy at times consider the SDGs as one driver of how they program their “people, time and money.”

The United States signed onto these Goals in 2015 and has recognized them throughout subsequent administrations. But other than an initial statement of support by President Obama in 2015,<sup>7</sup> we have not used the SDGs to significantly inform our international development policy.

I've taken the SDGs seriously in my time at CSIS. Over a six-year period, I've held nine<sup>8</sup> public events, hosted podcasts, and in partnership with my colleagues at CSIS, produced at least six research papers in the last seven years that discuss different components of the Goals. At the request of the Obama White House in 2013, I convened a group of my Republican colleagues, to host John Podesta, then the Obama administration's representative to the High-Level Panel, which was the planning group for the SDGs.

Neither the U.S. Congress nor any Republican or Democratic administration has used the Goals as the primary lens to program the people, time, or money of our foreign assistance or other relevant policies and programs.

From a U.S. perspective, there are a couple of challenges with the SDGs, some which are fixable, and others which may be less so.

Let me focus on one that is fixable, which is the issue of data and measurement. The original SDGs come from something called the Millennium Development Goals (there were 7 original goals and then an 8<sup>th</sup> goal was later added) which were devised in the mid-1990s and based on an OECD paper called “Shaping the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,”<sup>9</sup> which in turn drew on measurable goals that had been adopted in various UN conferences. The MDGs were all measurable and all had been agreed upon at various UN events. One of the criticisms of the MDGs was that the process for selecting the goals was not sufficiently inclusive. As a result, the SDG process started 12 years later became an extensive consultation that continued over a two-year period. The upside of this is that the SDGs had greater buy-in, but the downside was that achieving global consensus required 17 goals and 169 indicators, reducing some of the focus, simplicity, and elegance of the MDGs, and I would argue this diluted some of the inspiration that the MDGs offered.

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<sup>6</sup> *About BRI-SDGs | Jointly Building Belt and Road towards SDGs*. (n.d.). Retrieved September 13, 2022, from <https://www.brisdgs.org/about-bri-sdgs>

<sup>7</sup> *Sustainable Development Goals | Archive—U.S. Agency for International Development*. (2016, September 20). <https://2017-2020.usaid.gov/globalgoals>

<sup>8</sup> *The Sustainable Development Goals | Center for Strategic and International Studies*. (n.d.). Retrieved September 13, 2022, from <https://www.csis.org/programs/project-us-leadership-development/sustainable-development-goals>

<sup>9</sup> *Shaping the 21st Century: The Contribution of Development Co-operation* (Best Practices in Development Co-operation). (1996). [Best Practices in Development Co-operation]. <https://doi.org/10.1787/da2d4165-en>

Some of the SDGs are measurable, but some unfortunately are more aspirational and quite difficult to measure. To respond to this, the UN system has tried to get a handle on data collection and measurement as well as strengthening national statistical capabilities. The High-Level Panel when putting the draft 17 goals forward called for a “revolution in data” to address this problem. Despite admirable work by the UN statistical office, seven years into the SDGs we have still not achieved a revolution in data.

## **WHY DO WE CARE ABOUT THE SDGS?**

Why should we care about the SDGs? We should care about the SDGs because the rest of the world cares about them. If we want to speak to others and influence others, we should be conversant in the SDG language just as if we were conversant in Spanish or Mandarin. The SDGs are a specialized language, and we should be able to speak it.

We underestimate in Washington the moral authority and the unique convening power of the United Nations system. I think there may be a temptation to dismiss the United Nations system because it has many faults. This convening power and moral authority of the UN System has allowed the SDGs to be taken very seriously and somewhat literally outside of the US.

As you all know, the United Nations is not just the UN General Assembly or the UN Secretariat. There are 17 specialized agencies<sup>10</sup> that do important work, including the World Food Program and UNICEF, both of which are always led by Americans. We are the UN’s largest donor, funding just under one fifth of the collective budget<sup>11</sup>.

Like everything else in the multilateral system, the SDGs will be less difficult for us if the U.S. is actively involved in supporting them, because like other things in the multilateral system, China will fill the void in the SDGs if we are not involved.

Let me talk about China. China has been seeking to reference the SDGs in its basic strategy documents for Chinese development cooperation and in its Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>12</sup> The Chinese Communist Party has insisted on pushing their Belt and Road Initiative as sort of endorsed by the United Nations system and has specifically tried to put the “halo effect” of the SDGs onto its development initiatives. If we ignore the SDGs, the Chinese Communist Party gets to define the SDGs, which is something that we are not going to like.

Second, China is very comfortable talking about several of the SDGs that have to do with poverty, but they are extremely uncomfortable with a critical goal, which is called goal 16, which is centered

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<sup>10</sup> Nations, U. (n.d.). *Specialized Agencies*. United Nations; United Nations. Retrieved September 13, 2022, from <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/specialized-agencies>

<sup>11</sup> *How Much Does the U.S. Contribute to the UN?* (n.d.). Council on Foreign Relations. Retrieved September 13, 2022, from <https://www.cfr.org/article/funding-united-nations-what-impact-do-us-contributions-have-un-agencies-and-programs>

<sup>12</sup> *About BRI-SDGs / Jointly Building Belt and Road towards SDGs*. (n.d.). Retrieved September 13, 2022, from <https://www.brisdgs.org/about-bri-sdgs>

around democratic governance, human rights, access to justice, and accountable institutions. The free world, including the United States, should do more to promote the centrality of democratic governance and human rights to achieving all other development goals. There is a group of 43 UN member nations<sup>13</sup> working to accelerate the implementation of the SDG 16 targets for peace, inclusion, and justice – the U.S. is currently not a member of this group. Emphasizing the importance and centrality of goal 16 can help to promote a freer world, but also highlights specifically why China should not be a leader in the SDG space.

## **COVID-19 AND THE SDGS**

I have been asked to speak about how Covid-19 has the world focused back on the SDGs. It is true that for the measurable goals, there have been significant setbacks because of Covid-19.<sup>14</sup> One option is to ask for a 3-to-5-year extension on the Goals. I think getting an extension will be very difficult given that everyone would have to agree. I am also leery of using the argument that we are “falling behind on the SDGs” as a principal argument to spend more U.S. foreign assistance monies. At the same time, I think we should consider targeted increases in aid, where doing so can promote the national interest. For example, increases in food aid in places where we may see coups of democratic regimes due to shortages, telecommunications aid to prevent the adoption of Huawei technology, and as we have been doing recently, providing vaccines to countries that need them both to stop trans-national disease spread and to ensure that Vladimir Putin and the Chinese Communist Party do not reap public diplomacy rewards by offering inferior vaccines because we haven't yet made available our “top shelf” Western vaccines. If in response to these challenges, we speak to how we are helping close the gap on certain Goals to engage partners, meet countries where they are, and send signals to the UN system that we care somewhat about the goals, then that is fine.

## **ACTION ITEMS**

What should the administration and the Congress “do” about the Goals?

First, the boring issue of data remains complicated and could use more U.S. assistance. Data can be described as a public good that everybody uses, but nobody owns. Improving the collection of data can be an eye glazing topic but it is really important. We should provide more money to some of the different initiatives surrounding the SDGs to improve data collection and statistical capabilities, not only through the SDG process but in building data collection in specific developing countries. Like with the SDGs more generally, if the U.S. leaves a void in this area, China will seek to fill it. One of the things that I have learned about data is that democratic societies, even poor ones, have a greater demand for data than authoritarian ones. Authoritarians, not just China under the Chinese Communist Party, have a tendency to lie to their people by manipulating basic data and interfering in basic statistical gathering.

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<sup>13</sup> *SDG 16 Plus | Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies*. (n.d.). Pathfinders. Retrieved September 13, 2022, from <https://www.sdg16.plus>

<sup>14</sup> *Covid-19 Demands Innovative Ideas for Financing the SDGs*. (n.d.). Retrieved September 13, 2022, from <https://www.csis.org/analysis/covid-19-demands-innovative-ideas-financing-sdgs>

I am sure all of you have heard the term “big data,” but oftentimes statistical data gathering is in the realm of what may be described as “small data,” the collection of basic statistics. Ensuring that this is done effectively requires ensuring that poor countries have well-trained officials gathering information with computers and electricity. I have been to countries where the statistical offices do much of the work using paper and where some of the staff may be neither literate nor numerate – this is in the chief statistical agency.

Given the strength of the U.S. private sector in the information technology and data space, we have a unique opportunity to partner with these companies and leverage their expertise to improve data collection. Through utilizing our robust private sector, we can help speed up and improve this process without repeatedly asking developing countries to give us access to all of their intellectual capital.

Second, Congress should encourage the executive branch to measure and report to them how U.S. initiatives are contributing to global SDG progress through our foreign aid investments. Using and referencing the Goals will provide the U.S. with added credibility on its priorities and equip the U.S. diplomacy and the U.S. development systems with the basis for increased partnerships with coalitions of the willing, and provide new forms of accountability for those nations which may want to downplay certain Goals. Having a stronger U.S. presence in the SDG space can help with collaboration and efficiency, but also with protecting the Goals from being coopted by the Chinese Communist Party. Through being more actively involved, we can block our competitors and adversaries from unduly claiming the SDG “halo effect.”

Third, let’s try to hold the line when the inevitable next set of Goals is proposed. Various interest groups that did not get one of their wishes met by one of the 169 indicators may propose indicator number 170 or goal 18. I think we should seek to stop the phenomenon of “goal creep.” If we have a Republican administration when the next round of Goals begins planning in earnest, I expect such an administration will be particularly energetic in seeking to stop goal creep. The planning for the next round, to look beyond 2030, will get going in 2026 – at the mid-point of the next presidential term.

In conclusion, we are halfway through the Goals. We are not going to achieve them by 2030. Covid-19 was a multi-dimensional catastrophe and the SDGs helped measure the setbacks we experienced. The SDGs also give us a common language to talk about what needs to be done in response.

Moving forward, we ought to selectively incorporate the SDGs into our international development policy and use our unique national advantages to improve data collection and measurement. In addition to it being the right thing to do, if we fail to be more involved, authoritarian competitors could fill the gap.